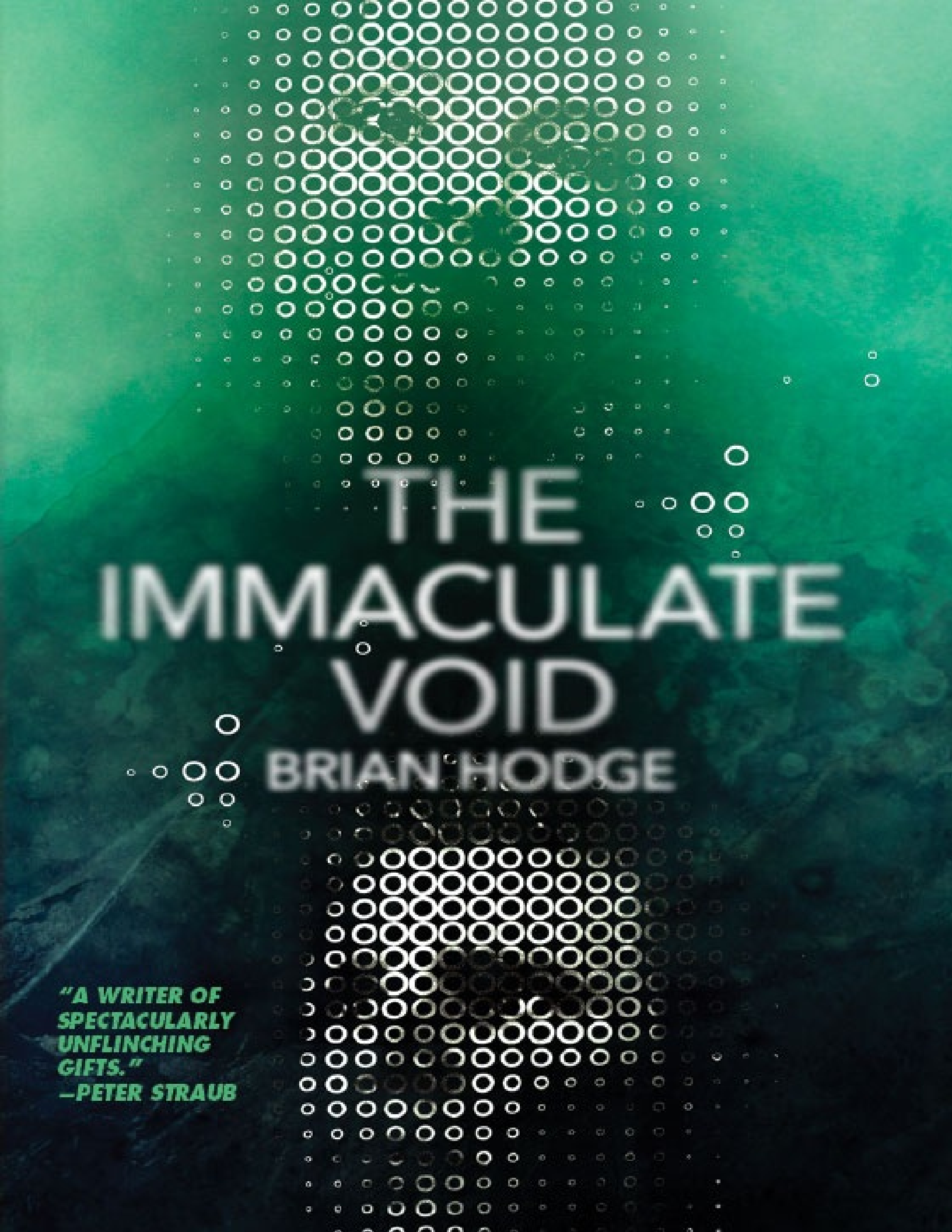
THE
IMMACULATE
VOID
BRIAN HODGE
"A WRITER OF SPECTACULARLY UNFLINCHING GIFTS."
—PETER STRAUB

THE IMMACULATE VOID

BRIAN HODGE

PRAISE FOR THE IMMACULATE VOID AND BRIAN HODGE

“The Immaculate Void is a highly cinematic, fast-paced, gory, disturbing, yet in its heart of hearts, touchingly warm tale of horrors which may surpass humanity, but does not entirely diminish it, even in the face of apocalypse.”

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“Not only does Brian Hodge get the ‘cosmic awe’ concept nailed down, but his characters, and the way he describes the relationships between them, are expertly drawn to a degree that [H.P.] Lovecraft himself could never have achieved.”

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—Gothic.net

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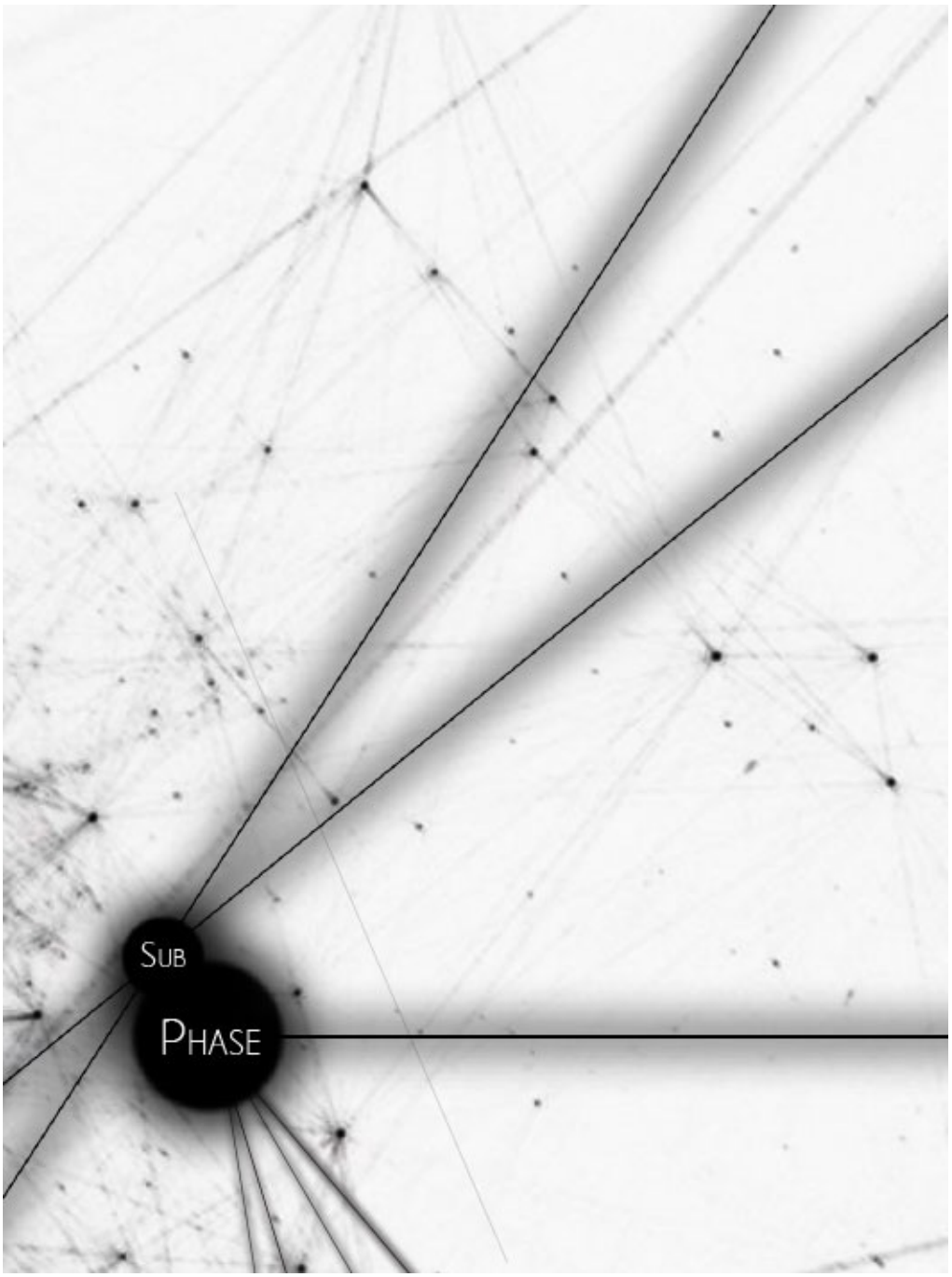
That was the age when nothing was;
There was no sand, nor sea, nor cool waves,
No earth nor sky nor grass there,
Only Ginnungagap.
—The Völuspá


SUB
PHASE

A man said to the universe:
“Sir I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.”
—Stephen Crane

The prayer books have always gotten it wrong.

If humanity were to give thanks where it was really due, we would have to first smash our idols and toss out those dreary hymnals and convert all the churches into something useful, like brothels and homeless shelters.

Fuck that noise, mankind would’ve said. *From now on, I’m a giants fan.*

Prayers to the gas giants—they wouldn’t be heard any more than the others, all that begging for touchdowns and tumor relief, but at least they wouldn’t be misplaced. Prayers to Jupiter most of all. We’ve only made it as far as we have by Jupiter’s mercy. That huge striped gassy ball with the red spot may bear the name of a god that the Romans named only within the last 3,000 years, but it was our protector way before that, even before the first multi-celled organisms started paddling around in the soup of Earth’s primordial seas.

Some astronomer who will never get the proper credit for being clever called Jupiter a cosmic vacuum cleaner. It does what you want in a Hoover, only on a celestial scale, exerting such gravitational oomph that it keeps the inner solar system safe by sucking in the comets and heavyweight asteroids that might have gotten through to keep knocking life back into the pond every time it tried to venture onto dry land.

Mostly. A few have slipped past to cause trouble. Anyone who’s ever gone out hunting for dinosaurs knows it’s not a perfect system. And something sure as shit came along to punch the hell out of Mars. Overall, though, it’s worked out well for us so far.

That’s why, if things were going to start deviating from the norms, it made

sense to me that Jupiter would show the first unmissable signs. So often, throughout history, the omens of disaster made their first appearances in the outer provinces before hitting home.

You wouldn't think events happening years apart, at points in the solar system hundreds of millions of miles distant, would have anything to do with each other. You wouldn't think that the serial murders of children, and the one who got away, would have any connection with the strange fate of one of Jupiter's moons.

But it does. It's all connected. Everything's connected.

So when things start to unravel, it *all* starts to unravel.

Here's how it's supposed to go: When the Shoemaker-Levy 9 comet broke apart and bombarded Jupiter's southern hemisphere, that gave us our first real-time look at its role as our protector, taking one for the team. This was our first look at anything of the sort, two celestial bodies on a collision course. I'd grown up seeing the motion of the cosmic spheres presented in a tranquil, clockwork model . . . but this was just another lie. Liar, liar, planet on fire.

Not that I realized this at the time. The Shoemaker-Levy impact was the summer of 1994, when I was five years old. When you're five, Comet is a magic reindeer.

And I was still a summer away from ending up in the wrong toolshed.

Here's how it's *not* supposed to go: Whatever hit Jupiter sixteen years later, on June 3, 2010, nobody even saw it coming. Maybe another comet, maybe an asteroid. It disintegrated upon impact with the high-altitude clouds in the tippy-top of Jupiter's atmosphere, with an explosion bright enough to be seen through telescopes in attics and backyards. It was so unexpected, images of it were caught by just two people on Earth, both amateur astronomers, one in the Philippines, the other in Australia.

And then, nothing. There was no follow-up show for the latecomers who turned their lenses to Jupiter to watch the debris cloud. There *was* no debris cloud.

You'd expect one. There had always been one before. They're called bruises, a pureed blend of chemically mangled gasses and flash-fried dust churning

among the cloud belts. After Shoemaker-Levy 9, Jupiter was as bruised as a boxer who's taken a twelve-round beating.

This time? *Nada.*

"It's as if Jupiter just swallowed the thing whole," the Aussie astronomer said.

But anomalies are easy to dismiss. So last year, when the Errington-Walters comet became the latest casualty of Jupiter's tidal forces and got pulled apart on the way in, like a cannonball fragmenting into a shotgun blast, the world's astronomers fell back to Shoemaker-Levy levels of expectation: *Great, here we go again. Maybe it will be an even better show this time. We've got over twenty years of improvements in telescopes in our favor.*

Only it didn't pan out as projected. The pieces hit Europa, instead.

It's not without precedent. Jupiter is greedy for moons. It's got sixty-seven of them, or did, and sometimes they get in the way of what its gravity ensnares. Only four of Jupiter's moons are the main ones, big enough to have been first observed by Galileo. Like all of us survivors, they have their scars. Ganymede has three chains of craters, like a strafed line of bullet holes fired from a fighter plane the size of a mountain. Poor Callisto has thirteen of them.

But for Europa to take the hit, that was sad. It wasn't just any ball of rock and metal like the others. It was a ball of rock and metal with a thick rind of ice around it, and liquid water underneath. An ocean world. If there was anyplace else in the solar system where we might find life, here was an ideal spot to start looking. With so much we don't yet know about our own oceans, imagine what could be waiting in this one.

So it was a dismal thing to see a string of impacts crack the ice apart and send up giant plumes of steam and ejecta, and wonder how much of the most pristine ocean ever known was boiling. We could've been watching our nearest neighbors get vaporized right in front of our telescopic eyes before we'd had a chance to say hello, even if they were just microbes or space squids.

Nothing good comes of comets—that was the position of our ancestors. Comets meant disease and famine and death and war. They were omens of disaster, signs of the wrath of the gods. Not one bit good for morale.

Which didn’t go unremarked on over the weeks after Errington-Walters ended its multi-billion year run, when, for reasons nobody could explain, Europa appeared to shrink and disappear.

It hadn’t been knocked out of orbit. It hadn’t been pulverized into fragments. There wasn’t even a lingering debris cloud—sound familiar? Europa simply began to diminish, like a balloon whose air was slowly leaking away.

It’s as if Europa just swallowed itself, some Aussie astronomer might as well have said.

Most people didn’t care. Most people hadn’t noticed. Most people had never heard of Europa. Most people were doing good just to have heard of Jupiter. Because most people have no idea how deaf, blind, and ignorant they really are, with no desire to live any other way.

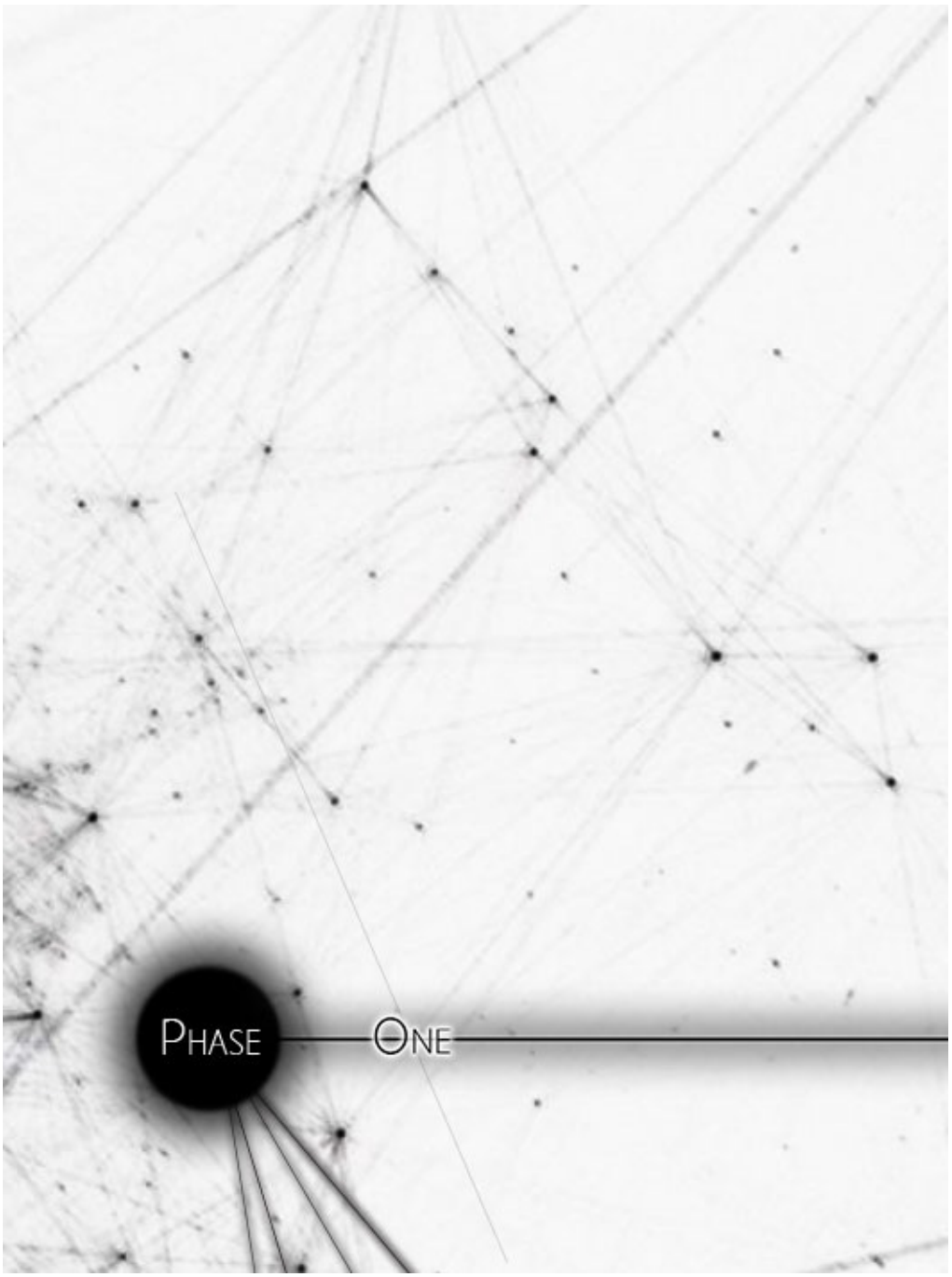
If you knew where to tune in, though, you could follow the baffled commentary.

I felt sorry for Neil deGrasse Tyson and Michio Kaku and the other talking heads like them. They were supposed to have the answers. They were supposed to be the go-to guys to explain what was happening in space. The best they could manage was to look circumspect and adorably humbled as they tried to reframe the mystery as an opportunity to learn from an event no one had observed before. What they were really doing was looking for different ways to avoid coming right out and saying, “Nope, sorry, not a fucking clue.”

Plus they still had to endure all those lame jokes about the gods being angry.

It wasn’t that. Definitely not that.

There are some things that even scare the shit out of the gods.


PHASE ONE

The religious myth is one of man's greatest and most significant achievements, giving him the security and inner strength not to be crushed by the monstrousness of the universe.
—Carl Jung

She'd been gone for edging on two days before he knew about it, Tanner getting the call from the latest contestant in Daphne's unbroken string of losers.

"Is she there with you?" the guy asked. "I like to let her have her space, but our rent's due when it's due. I've been calling, but all I ever get is voice mail."

This one's name was Val. Val Madigan, Val short for Valmont, and if that wasn't reason enough to hate him, he was a downsized sales manager who, after being made redundant in some tech company, had rebounded by hanging out a shingle as a life coach. Never mind the marriage that was supposed to have been over months ago but was still officially street-legal. Never mind another ex's restraining order.

That was Daphne for you. No garden variety losers for her. Alcoholics, weed dealers who smoked their supply, or terminally unemployed charmers oozing love for whatever woman they could squeeze for another month of subsidy—those weren't her style. Daphne picked her losers with finesse. It might take longer for the flaws to reveal themselves, but by god, once they did, they ran deep.

Daphne and Val had been sharing 1,800 square feet of split-level suburban anonymity northwest of Denver, in Broomfield, where Tanner caught up with

him the morning after the call. A bright September Monday, his day off. *You just have to be Val*, he almost said to the guy who opened the door. Not because who else would it be; more that he looked like a Val, fifteen years Daphne's senior, going leathery and tight, with sandy hair in a jarringly different shade from his eyebrows and the tapering sideburns that poked halfway down his ears.

"I wasn't expecting you," Val said. "Do you need to come in?"

"I can't look through her stuff from out here."

"You came to look through her stuff? Why?"

"It's what brothers do when little sisters go missing."

"Did I say she was missing? No, I'm sorry if I gave the wrong impression. She's not missing . . . she's just stepped away at an inconvenient time and I thought she might have gone to see you."

Tanner nodded. As if he cared about this guy's interpretations. "You've known her for how long?"

Val counted, trying not to show it, but his fingertips twitched at his side. "Seven months," he said. Then was quick to add, "And a half."

"That long, huh. Then how about we both agree that I'm more familiar with her patterns than you are." Tanner leaned to one side, to peer around Val's shoulder. "Are you going to let me in?"

The place was neat and clean, bright and sparse. Daphne had never lived in unkemptness, and neither of them appeared to have brought a lot of furniture to the merger.

"She likes a room of her own," Tanner said. "Where is it?"

Val pointed down the half-flight of stairs leading to the bottom level, into an oblong room that a family might have used for the kids' TV room, but held only a treadmill and framed wall hangings of motivational phrases. Off that, to the left, a smaller square room sat idle.

This would be Daphne's. It didn't matter where she bedded down each night —she still would've insisted on this, staking her claim like a kid taking the top bunk at camp. It wasn't for sleeping. She liked the option to feel safe. The three locks on the inside of the door looked new enough to have been added in the past seven months. And a half.

Val had been dogging his footsteps until now, but hung back a few steps from the doorway. She'd trained him well. *My space. Mine. You don't come in here.*

A desk that had spent its best years in some office sat with one end against a wall, facing the door. An Epson printer took up the wall end, its USB cable connected to nothing. He found spiral-bound notebooks, half their pages torn away to leave only the blanks. One drawer rattled with castoff phones and accessories. For no reason she had ever shared, Daphne changed them often. New phones, new numbers, different carriers. Not always, just within the last three years or so.

Tanner had done his best to make sure the issue wasn't a stalker. He knew how these things could go. Once wounded, always scarred. Predators could smell it. It didn't matter how much work you'd put in to get past the trauma, how much healing you'd done. There were guys who could always find something to pick up on, the drop of blood in the ocean that brought the sharks from five miles away.

No, I don't have a stalker, I just like to stay a moving target, she'd insisted with a little laugh. *But thanks for being ready to beat the balls off someone, just the same.*

Once wounded, always scarred—for all he knew, this was Daphne's appeal to the guy lurking past the door. Maybe he even meant well, fancied himself a healer. But it was often incompetents who meant well that did the most gratuitous harm. Tanner had lost track of how many times he'd seen it play out that way in the mountains.

Near the desk, a pair of corkboards hung on the wall, studded with pushpins but otherwise empty. Interesting. She'd had so much to pin up that she'd added a second board. All vacant now. He found a sadness to it that scraped inside his heart. Every place she'd lived had the look of a home for someone who always knew she was only passing through.

"What did she have pinned up here?"

"Printouts, mostly." Val pointed at the Epson. "She'd get online and find these news stories. She liked to print them out so she could read them wherever.

She was really interested in that Jupiter thing last year. And that other thing this winter, was it Alpha Centauri? She didn't really seem to be into astronomy overall, just those." He gave a go-figure shrug. "I tried getting her a telescope for her birthday. She took it back unopened."

Tanner had never known Daphne to spare much interest for the night skies, either, other than lying on their backs and looking at the stars years ago, back when it was something to do while getting philosophical or stoned or both.

"How come? Did she say why?"

"After some pressing to face up to her negative associations, yes." Val seemed proud of that, as if he'd engineered a breakthrough. "She said she didn't want to risk seeing what was really out there."

"What was that supposed to mean?"

"It doesn't have to mean anything. People will say silly things to end a conversation they don't want to have."

It felt like a safe bet that Val might have a lot of experience with this. Tanner zeroed in on the corkboard again. "Anything else she had up there?"

"A few articles about killings. Unsolved murders, I think. A few others about . . . I don't know what you'd even call it. Eco-terrorism in reverse, maybe? Natural features getting destroyed instead of despoilers being targeted. I didn't pick up on much more of these than what I could see from the headlines. It wasn't anything she wanted to talk about. There didn't seem to be any connection between them, so I don't know what it all meant to her. I just didn't think they were healthy things for her to indulge in, all things considered. But my opinion and expertise were not wanted on the matter."

Healthy, he'd said. *All things considered*. So yes, Val must have known about Wade Shavers. Or as much as Daphne was ready for him to know. Just couldn't resist a tall, blonde fixer-upper with hauntings in her ice-blue eyes, and enough of a flaw on one cheek to make her self-conscious, take her down a peg.

"You know . . . come to think of it . . . I wonder if she might've gone back to the guy she was seeing before we met." Val had the quizzical expression of someone trying too hard to sell the appearance of having just had a spontaneous idea. "Attila . . . ? Did you know about Attila?"

He hated being blindsided, but wasn't going to pretend. "Daphne must've forgotten to mention him." Sidestep, jab: "There have been so many, you know."

Attila, though. She'd shacked up with someone named Attila. Ten bucks said this was Val's agenda all along. He'd set this up and played it like a man with an advanced degree in Weasel. He'd *known* Tanner was going to show up. It was just a matter of dropping the right crumbs, letting him take the bait. *Would you mind terribly checking to see if she's gone back with Attila? I'd do it myself, but my cowardly inner core has been flaring up again lately, the darned thing.*

"I overheard her on the phone Saturday morning, it sounded like she was talking about some sort of meet-up," Val went on. "I thought it was something to do with her yoga class. She's really taken to that the past several months, you know. I thought it was a healthy thing for her. But now, thinking back, twenty-twenty hindsight and all, I'm not sure that's what the call was about at all. It was her tone of voice."

"What about it?"

"Her tone was . . ." He pretended to claw for the right word. "Regretful. She sounded regretful."

If Daphne understood anything, it was regrets. She collected regrets like trading cards. She was wired that way. No—had been *re*wired.

"And Attila doesn't sound like the name of someone into yoga, right?"

"He wasn't good for her then. He wouldn't be good for her now. It sounds like he has some . . . strange ideas."

"About what?"

"Oh, god. Everything."

On the floor beside Daphne's desk, a small wicker wastebasket stood empty. Tanner set it atop the desk, then filled it with her discarded phones and their chargers from the drawer. He wrapped an arm around it, tucking it to his ribs, and headed out the door.

"Excuse me?" Val blurted. "Those really aren't yours to take, you know."

An odd objection, under the circumstances. But Val was an odd guy, and getting odder. His eyes had gone glassy during the last several moments, his expression dazed, as if he wasn't quite sure what he was saying. Or maybe he

didn’t know what he really wanted out of this after all.

Tanner brushed past him. “Do you have a better way for me to find Attila?”

The man flanked him past the treadmill. At the half-flight of steps leading to the entrance landing, Val slapped a hand on his shoulder. “I hate to bring it up, but . . . um . . . you didn’t happen to bring a check for her half of the rent, did you?”

It was done before Tanner knew he was going to do it. He pivoted at the waist, sharp and snappy, and pistoned a fist into Val’s middle, enough to double him over and send him a step back, then drop wheezing to the floor. The move wasn’t anything he’d practiced, but couldn’t have been more effective if he had. The mountains hardened you, bone and sinew. They cured you like the wind-twisted pines that held fast to the slopes and endured whatever the elements threw at them. All that, he threw into Val.

He didn’t know why he’d done it. The hand, maybe—that presumptuous hand on his shoulder, something revolting about it. This hand that had groped his sister, a hand she never would’ve allowed near her if she’d grown up like she was supposed to.

It was a punch with twenty-odd years of guilt behind it. All he’d had to do was keep an eye on her that day, the way he was supposed to, instead of letting himself get lured over to the neighbor’s Nintendo console two doors down. He’d demurred at first, but the kid’s logic was persuasive.

She’s on the swing-set. She knows how to swing. Nothing’s gonna happen to her there.

Half fetal, half boneless, Val peered up at him from the floor, puzzled and hurt and disappointed. “You’re . . . supposed to *help* people,” he gasped.

Too right. He was. And he always did. Even when they were stupid enough to have brought their misfortune on themselves. Climbing where they had no business climbing, or scorning the idea of properly equipping themselves, or doing everything right until they couldn’t resist whatever spur-of-the-moment dumb thing it was that got them in trouble. None of that mattered. You found them when they were lost, extracted them when they were trapped. You splinted their bones and bound their wounds, hydrated them and warmed their

hypothermia, and you held back any judgment while evacuating them down off the mountains or out of the canyons. Rescue meant rescue. Damn right he was supposed to help.

“I’m sorry,” Tanner said. “I am so sorry.”

He extended his arm to offer a hand up, and felt it again, that revulsion whose cause he couldn’t pinpoint. Just fingers and a palm—Val’s didn’t look different from his own. Yet something in that touch made his insides flip and roll.

He’d touched the dead before—when searches had turned up bodies, rescue turning to recovery—and there was a difference. Their hands became inert matter, rather than matter ensouled. The energy had ceased to flow, its conduit severed. Which sounded superstitious for anyone who’d never experienced it.

And this, with Val, was like that, only magnified. It was a touch not of death, nor even decay, but something beyond them, that felt antithetical to life itself, that sought to corrupt and consume, because that was its nature. It felt as if he’d gripped something that came apart in his grasp, whose pieces sought to reassemble and climb his arm and claim it, like gangrene.

Val’s eyes were unfocused and blank, no longer seeing Tanner, not as he was, anyway. On the floor, Val fumbled and wallowed as if only halfway in control of his limbs. But he knew what the wastebasket was, and it seemed important to him. He cast an arm after it with no more coordination than if he were throwing a lasso for the first time. His fingertip hooked the rim and yanked the wicker basket from Tanner’s grasp as he backed away, and the phones went spilling to the floor.

Val rolled forward like a worm that had tried to stand and failed, then seized the nearest phone with scrabbling fingers and stuffed it into his mouth as far as he could. He grabbed another and used it to tamp the first one deeper, jamming both down his gullet as his throat distended like a bullfrog’s. He choked, an involuntary response, but it didn’t stop him from snatching up a third.

Tanner had seen enough, overriding the shock even if he had no idea what was happening. He smacked the third phone from Val’s hands and swept the others away with his foot. Val wavered, confused, then reoriented, homing back

in on the nearest one as if through some combination of sight and scent.

Under stress, you revert to training—it was the credo that first responders everywhere relied on to stay focused and do the job. But some things you could never train for. No one had ever thought of them. Tanner wasn't proud of letting his disgust get the better of him. Wasn't proud of stutter-stepping to the side and cracking his knee across Val's jaw because he didn't know what else to do.

Val didn't move, just lay on his side with the second phone jutting past his lips like a silver tongue. Tanner especially wasn't proud of his impulse to leave, to let fate take its course here. Daphne had enough crazy in her life without this lunatic.

Oh, right. He was supposed to help people.

Even the ones who, under the surface, felt like they were something else.

A moment of sympathy, please, for the red dwarf, too. He deserved so much better, poor little guy. But when does deserve ever have anything to do with it?

Missing moons are one thing, especially around our gas giant guardians. What's that—Europa's gone missing? Well, it's not like Jupiter doesn't have sixty-six more for consolation.

But when the stars start going out, that's when anybody can take notice. This is something anyone can detect with the unaided eye, as long as they know where to look. You can actually *see* that fresh, star-shaped hole in the night sky, more empty blackness merging with the rest, as the void gets a wee bit bigger.

They're going out all the time, of course. Somewhere. We know this. Gaze at enough night skies with enough people, and guaranteed, somebody laboring under the impression they're the first to tell you has to point out that the light we're seeing now left its source thousands of years ago, or a million, or a billion.

The well-meaning dorks let it go at that. The obnoxious pricks go on to tell you that's why it's no good wishing upon a star. We're only seeing the light. The star itself is long dead. Just like your dreams, loser.

But when it happened to the Alpha Centauri system, that was too close to home for comfort. These were our nearest neighbors, galactically speaking, a trifling 4.37 light years away—two stars so close together they looked like one.

They were already there at the birth of our own sun. They've watched us this entire time. When some flippered mudskipper-thing first flopped out of the sea, they were there. When the first apes who stood upright paused to stare in wonder beyond the canopy of trees, they were there. When the first human ground out some glass lenses and trained them on the stars, and discovered that the third-brightest one in the sky was actually two stars instead of one, the pair of them smiled back and said, "Not bad . . . you've found out our secret. Now let's see what else you can do."

For our entire existence, they hung up there like the promised land for some better, more accomplished version of ourselves. Waiting for us to realize our potential. Once interstellar travel became feasible, they were sure to be our first stop. And if one had a habitable planet orbiting it, hey, two new suns to bask under. Three, if you counted their dim, runty little brother off to the side.

Then, like twins who'd made a suicide pact, they went out together. The first warning came when the light of Alpha Centauri A dimmed a staggering 21% in four months. After that, the end came faster and faster, in that way of vast whirling bodies whose gravity leads them to tear each other to pieces, as Alpha Centauri B streamed into its sibling, and together they writhed and dwindled and died.

And Proxima Centauri, the red dwarf, the dim kid brother tagging along, too far away for the cataclysm to claim him, too, was left alone in his sky.

They were our nearest neighbors, who'd been there before us, then they were gone, leaving us that much more alone in the night.

But it was all a post-mortem show. Light years, remember?

They were gone for nearly four years before we had a clue. We could only watch it happen knowing that we were staring into the abyss of a past we couldn't change, presaging a future that looked less stable than before.

But the gods noticed.

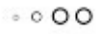
They must have recognized what was happening years before we could have.

The gods panicked and moved in their own self-interest, the only way they could —through us—secure in the knowledge that the speed of light was our greatest unsolvable weakness.

It was Attila who first got me looking up and out. When Europa vanished, that meant something *big* to him, I just didn't know what. By the time Alpha Centauri died, I'd moved on to Val, who thought, hmm, that's interesting—would a telescope augment your sense of self?

No thanks. The firmament over our heads is a deception.

What we see is what already was, a collage of vastly different time zones, and before we can even know it, everything around us has changed.



The first thing Tanner did was clear the cell phone from Val's mouth, the second one he'd grabbed and tried to jam down his pipes. The first one was gone, swallowed whole somehow, nothing visible when he pried Val's chin down to peer toward the back of his throat. He wasn't going to fish his fingers any deeper for it. That knee across the jaw hadn't put Val entirely out, only left him dazed. If he decided he was going to bite, he would bite.

Tanner pressed his fingertips around Val's throat, feeling for obstructions, and couldn't find any. By all indications, it had cleared. A phone. A rectangular peg in a round hole, gulped like a snake forcing down a mouse. EMTs may have seen things as freakish, but for Tanner, this was as bizarre as it had ever gotten.

He worked quickly, before Val might rouse and return to the fugue state he'd been in moments ago. Tanner dragged him over to the treadmill and sat him upright in the middle of the belt. He snatched two curtain ties from a window and used them to bind Val's wrists to the handrails. He put in a call to 911, then waited for Val's head to finish clearing. When it did, he seemed himself again, only groggier.

Tanner squatted before him, out of kicking range. "How does your jaw feel?"

Val was still taking stock of where he was. "Sore."

“And what about your throat, how’s that feel?”

“Worse.” He looked puzzled by why his arms were raised and dangling, as if he’d awakened along a dungeon wall, unsure of whether he should be angry or afraid. “What am I doing—?”

“You swallowed one of Daphne’s phones.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I can’t answer that. You tried to swallow two more. If I hadn’t stopped you, I think you might’ve swallowed all seven of them.”

Apparently something inside Val felt wrong enough that he needed no further convincing. There was no way to tell where it had lodged, in his esophagus or if it had made it all the way to his stomach. His airway was clear, at least, but Tanner couldn’t fathom how Val had gotten the thing as far as he had. An older, smaller, flip phone, maybe, but not a Samsung Galaxy.

“Everything hurts. *Everything.*” His voice sharpened with an edge of panic. “Can you get it out of me?”

“I’ve called for an ambulance. Just try to relax and don’t jar anything.”

“I . . . I think I want it out *now*.”

“Let’s let the pros handle that, why don’t we.”

Tanner left it at this, omitting the obvious. One shock at a time—a person could deal with only so much. You didn’t pass something like a phone in your stool, and you couldn’t bring it back up the same way it went in no matter how much Ipecac you drank. Val was looking at thoracic or abdominal surgery today.

“Do you remember anything about what just happened?”

Something lingered, judging by the look on Val’s face, but maybe nothing he could make sense of. Like trying to sort out a dream that had no logic this side of sleep.

And what of his own role in this? Tanner had dropped him first. Punched him in the gut to put him on the floor, and it had all followed from that. So what had he *done*—made Val feel so threatened that he retreated while some other part of his mind took over? It was as if Everyday Val had checked out. Regression, clumsy motor skills . . . he’d moved as though in the grip of something that had no idea *how* to move.

Not just that, but something about him had felt . . . loathsome. Tanner hadn't been aware of it while clearing his mouth and lashing him to the treadmill, but then, he might have been too focused for it in the moment. *Under stress, we revert to training.*

"I don't want to leave you tied up like this if I don't have to. If I undo those, are you going to be okay until the ambulance gets here?"

"I . . . I don't know. Maybe . . ." Val looked at each wrist, then down at his legs. "Maybe I should leave them on."

"Why do you say that?"

"Just a feeling." He shut both eyes, shook his head to clear it again. When he opened them, one eye twitched and squinted, as though he had an itch.

And could be they were overlooking the more obvious question. "Why were you so intent on keeping these phones from leaving the house?"

"I don't know." Val seemed genuinely mystified, then his voice dropped to a whisper. "It wasn't me. None of this is me."

"Can you say who it was?"

"*Not* me. Not anything." He shifted and winced, growing more uncomfortable, more distressed. His eye fluttered again, then the other, as sweat began to stream from his hairline. "I'm . . . I'm at home, right?"

"You never left. Why do you ask?"

"Because I can still see stars. And planets." He worked his tongue inside his jaw. "The solar wind, is what I think that is." A bruise the size of a ribeye began to darken the side of his throat. "There's no way I should fit in this house. And there's no sound. But I hear you talking anyway."

Thank god the ambulance was en route. Tanner wasn't sure what more he could do. With Rocky Mountain Search & Rescue, he'd found plenty of people in states of disorientation, but they'd always fallen within logical parameters: dehydration, hunger, exposure, hypothermia, conditions he knew how to treat. He wondered if Val might have had a stroke, although he wasn't showing signs of paralysis anywhere.

And a stroke wouldn't explain the bruises. He sprouted more, on his arms now, popping up like hives.

“But it’s all,” he said, as his voice frayed into a gargling sound and spun down in pitch, like a guitar string suddenly loosened, “going away.”

His bothersome eye didn’t so much burst as deflate, sagging in its socket as the cornea ruptured over the iris and the vitreous aqua oozed down his cheek. Val made a feeble murmur of surprise. His other eye remained wide and intact long enough for him to look straight at Tanner, begging for help, for answers, then look down as he wheezed and coughed a bloody handful of teeth into his lap.

He lost the other eye then, blind now and worse than mute, nothing coming out of him that Tanner could translate, or even recognize as human. Where Val’s skin wasn’t bruised it was speckled red with bursting capillaries. His hands, still dangling at the wrists, slipped through the bonds as though they’d turned to empty gloves. Both arms hit the treadmill’s belt with a boneless slap, just before his entire torso buckled and dropped into itself, his spine be damned, like a building undergoing demolition.

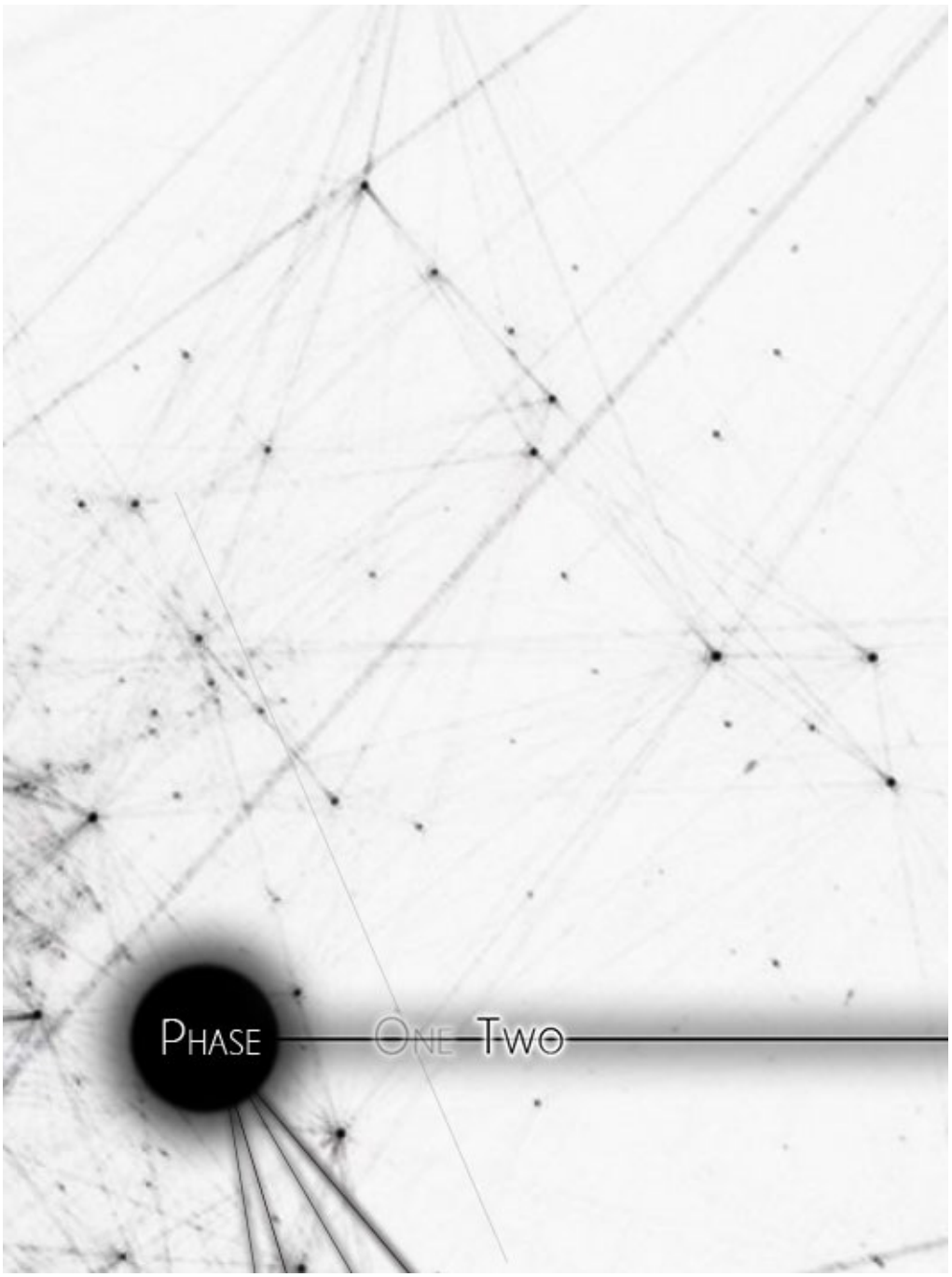
For a few terrible moments his jaw still worked, something inside him conscious and aware and making one last effort to plead for help, then it drooped and swayed, as his head sank with the rest of him, and whatever was still able twitched and jittered.

Too much—this was too much to take in at once. Wanting to help, having no idea how. Watching someone fall apart, literally, and not knowing where to grab first. Then realizing, no, he didn’t want to touch Val at all.

Val’s skin had split in more than a dozen places visible, probably more that weren’t. Tanner saw, deep in many of the seeping wounds, what looked like white pebbles—bone that had crumbled to fragments and shards.

The Ebola virus? The thought sent Tanner scuttling backwards, the only thing he knew of that caused such copious hemorrhaging and leaking. Yet that couldn’t be right. Ebola took days, and even at its worst, didn’t do *this* kind of damage.

He heard the siren in the distance, and sat on the stairs while putting in another call to 911 to have the EMTs hold back and bring in a communicable disease unit to seal the place off.


PHASE
ONE TWO

Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.
—Sophocles

Wade Shavers haunted me in the way only a predator can, after he'd taken everything good and left everything bad, then got himself dead before I learned the meaning of the word *closure*.

Some of us who have survived such things eventually develop this dream that keeps us going, a dream of confrontation. We want to meet our abuser, now that we're grown up and tall enough to look him in the eye and spit in his face if we wanted. Just this once, and then we can leave him in the past where he belongs.

Whether it happens behind bars, or out in the wild because he never got the justice he deserved, nothing else can cut him down in size quite like seeing firsthand that you don't have to peer up at him anymore. Look at you, you're not so big. You're not anything like the giant I remembered you being.

Then you say what you really came to say. You tell him how he broke you, but that you're still standing. How he bloodied you, and now you bow to no one. You let him know he doesn't have the power anymore.

I could've used that. But by the time I would've been ready, it was no longer an option. Shavers wasn't inside the Colorado State Penitentiary for three years before some guard left the right door open and a few prisoners from the general population cornered him with makeshift knives and stabbed him sixty-three times.

Thanks, guys. Now what am I supposed to do? Come visit you on Murderers

Row and tell you everything I had to say so you can pass along the message when you meet up with him again in a Hell I don't believe in?

So instead I was left with the memories and bad dreams and the anger and the hurt, and a feeling that I didn't belong anywhere. Actually, I didn't even have many memories of the experience, not at first. That wasn't the blessing some people thought it should've been. I knew something bad had happened to me, and it had left its marks, because I could see them whenever I looked down my body, or at my back in a mirror. But I didn't much remember the details. It was all buried down deep, where people thought it was for the best.

It wasn't for me. It was like living with somebody who's whispering terrible things in your ear while working a needle between your ribs, only when you whirl around to make him stop he's not there. And he always comes back.

Since I didn't have Wade Shavers around anymore, to pay that closure-seeking visit to, one therapist they took me to tried some Neuro-Linguistic Programming techniques so I could shrink him down in my mind's eye, to get him as small as I wanted so I could wad him up and throw him away. Or flick him aside with my finger like he was a mosquito after I made him give me back my blood. Anything I wanted.

Nice try.

That was when I decided that if I was to ever get it out of me, we'd have to go digging so I could face it head-on. Ten years was long enough. I was sixteen and driving, but there was no place far enough away I could drive where I wouldn't be taking those rootbound memories with me. Okay, then, hypnotize me. Let's see what's really in there.

Dr. Hannover took it slow, making sure I felt safe every step of the way. She was good about that.

Until our first sessions, I hadn't remembered when he'd grabbed me in the alley between the houses on Cherry Drive and the ones on Lime. Really? I fell for the line about looking for a lost puppy? So that was how he got me in his van.

I hadn't remembered he'd apologized, either, saying he'd seen me around. Up until then, he hadn't snatched a kid any closer than thirty-eight miles away,

and most from as far as Denver, but now his discipline was breaking down and he was snatching one three blocks from home. He'd spent too much time coveting what he'd been seeing playing outside that summer, and I was just soooo cuuuute and irresistible.

But it's not your fault, Daphne. None of it is your fault.

Once he got me in the toolshed, he didn't rush. He took his time.

They say that's what saved me: the fact that he got off on tears. You can keep somebody crying for hours if you dole out their punishment a little at a time, and keep building it up. Too much at once, and they might shut down. But he knew how to drag it out by then. He was practiced.

I hadn't remembered he was so chatty through it all, let alone what he'd had to say. But it was quite a conversation we had, him with his words and me with my tears. The main thing he tried to do was rationalize it. After all the others, maybe he had the speech down pat by now.

"You would've been better off if you'd never been born. We're here so I can fix that mistake. That cruel mistake." This was the kind of thing he'd tell me. "You can't see that now. But I can, because I'm older and I know better. I picked you because you're special. I picked you to save. There's so much misery in the world you're heading into and I want to spare you that. There is no amount of happiness that can make up for the suffering of a normal life. I want to release you from that. Doesn't that sound nice?"

It always came around to that: release. Then he'd get back to his tools, and the other needs I was there to help him take care of.

But that's not your fault either, Daphne. None of it was your fault.

I hadn't remembered how cold his hands were, even in summer, or how rough they felt. I hadn't remembered how hard it was to tell the difference between his bare hands and his whiskers and the sandpaper and eventually the wood rasp.

"Tonight you won't remember this. You won't know about any of it."

Good little girls forget what they're told to forget.

I suppose you could flip it around. Is any amount of torture worth enduring if the longer it goes on, the more likely it becomes that you won't be killed after

all?

His mistake was allowing enough time for the missing child alert to gain traction. This was the year before they started calling them AMBER Alerts, so back then it was just hey, got a missing kid out there, so if you see something, say something.

A thousand miles away, in Chicago, Terri Shavers was finally ready to think the unthinkable about her husband. She was a career counselor at a junior college, and two or three times a year she'd head off for a few days of seminars and workshops. When her afternoon session wrapped up, she went to the hotel bar and got onto her laptop to grab her e-mail and check the news of home and . . .

Hey, there's another missing kid out there.

It must have been a horrible conclusion for her to come to. That these regional abductions over the last few years always seemed to coincide with her professional development getaways finally caught up with her, and oh look, this latest one lives three blocks up the street.

I can picture her sitting in that hotel bar, trying not to vomit all over her table, feeling alone in the universe, crushed by the gravity of the black hole she'd just been sucked into. I imagine going for the phone was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

So thanks for making that call, Terri. Glad you finally hit critical mass.

It would've been super if you could have made the call one or two kids before me, but we all come to these realizations in our own time, don't we?

*

Tanner spent over two hours at Val's house before the waves of first responders could seal the place off, everybody looking identical in white germ suits and face masks, green gloves and bagged yellow boots. Eventually they carried him out on an isolation stretcher, a clear plastic cocoon on wheels, with a row of glove portals on either side to facilitate whatever emergency treatment he might need along the way.

How they were going to get Val out, he didn't know. A plastic tub, maybe,

then bring in a forensics vacuum to clean out the crevices in the treadmill, and cut away a section of carpet and roll it up for the rest of him.

"How are you feeling now, Tanner?" He heard that a lot.

"Fine," he would answer. "Still doing fine."

Because it was all they needed to near, and he figured if he got started on the rest, it might be awhile before he stopped: *If by fine we mean no symptoms but scared out of my fucking mind, because I just watched a man fall apart in front of me, literally. Nothing we know about does that. So what are we looking at here? Some sort of chemical or bio weapon, and somehow Val picked it up right before I got there? And meanwhile, I'm flinching at every little itch and tic, wondering if this was this how it started for him.*

But nobody needed to hear that to do their job.

Sirens all the way, they got him hustled into a quarantine room at National Jewish Health, a glass-fronted room that felt like a terrarium with a bed and a sink and a battery of monitors. He was swabbed and his vitals checked all over again. Pulse and blood pressure elevated, but that was to be expected. Samples, too. Fill this syringe, this specimen cup, plus this one, and this bigger one when you can. Blood, sputum, urine, feces. He hadn't barfed, but in case he did, they wanted that, as well.

Maybe he should spank one out for everybody, too, if he wasn't too stressed to get it up, so they could make sure he wasn't going to pass anything along to the next generation . . . and he'd done enough damage there already, hadn't he?

Then the waiting. Next stop, either test results or start losing all structural integrity in front of them. Somebody had phoned Beryl, and she was on her way, but until she got here he needed something more to do than wait to become their second medical grotesquery for the day. Quarantine was as well equipped for diversions as an insurance agent's waiting room.

"Can I have the phones that came in with me?" he asked. "I really could use those phones."

While waiting at Val's, he'd gathered them up again and sealed them in a gallon-size baggie from the kitchen. It took some arguing—that, depending on the test results, they might need to find his sister, Daphne Gustafson, and this

was one way to do it—but he finally got them delivered. They'd been wiped down and smelled of disinfectant. None of them had a live battery, but with the chargers he was able to get them going from a wall outlet.

Six phones, not including the one Val had swallowed. Until he found timestamps recent enough to prove otherwise, he was going to assume Daphne had another with her that she was either ignoring or was keeping turned off.

Seriously, who needed eight phones over the past three or four years? He knew people who upgraded annually, had to have the latest or risk being a lesser member of the species. Others, the careless ones, went through phones like cheap sunglasses.

But Daphne hadn't been either. Judging by the half-dozen he'd arranged on the floor, it was obvious she was no loyalist to brand or carrier. She didn't even show consistency between Android and iOS, and the unit that appeared to be the oldest was a proprietary BlackBerry.

With each one, Tanner poked around the saved data long enough to get an idea of where the phone fit in the timeline, and shuffled the row until they were ranked oldest to newest.

Relief—the locked ones all had the same passcode. She'd volunteered it two, three years ago, made him memorize it as if she'd foreseen a day like this on the horizon. Even then, she'd tried to sell it as a joke: *It's a just-in-case, that's all. You know . . . in case they find me in a dumpster someday, hah hah, and have to track my last forty-eight hours.*

God damn. The same old patterns all over again. Not paying the kind of attention he should've been.

He opened her contacts, saw names he knew and names he didn't. He thumbed through photos, scrolled through videos. He saw her wasted, saw her sober, saw her with co-workers at half a dozen jobs; wished he hadn't seen her naked and bailed out of that as fast as he could. Archived texts and e-mails, those too. From a basic overview, he was looking at hours of combing if he wanted to be thorough. None of which might help find her anyway.

On the third phone, he found that she'd begun using an app to record and archive calls a couple of years back. This was the one thing that looked . . . odd.

They were timestamped, but none of them had names logged for the caller ID, just a string of characters that were either scrambled beyond recognition or indecipherable to begin with. All of these, dozens of them, clocked in around the same length: forty-seven seconds, give or take a second or two.

When he played the oldest one, the speaker crackled with what sounded like a malfunction or a connectivity issue. It was the sound of white noise sharpened with a thick, resonant peak he found unnerving, a frequency trying to pry into a fold in his brain as a sliver will pry beneath a fingernail. Behind that, another sound struggled to break through—a voice, undoubtedly, but warbling, an indistinct sonic smear.

He played the second call and found the same, and the same again with the third and fourth. He couldn't imagine why Daphne was keeping them. If it was to report problems with her service, then they should have served their purpose. Delete them already.

Or. Maybe she'd kept them as evidence. Stalking, harassment, threats—*here's the pattern, here's how far back it goes, can't you guys do anything?*

Tanner skipped ahead to see if the later recordings showed any improvement in clarity. It was more of the same, with perhaps a suggestion that whoever was trying to make himself heard was starting to overcome the interference, as though finding his way through a fog.

Then it was time to put the phones away. Beryl was here, and Reese in her arms. She had the hollow eyes and taut lines of someone frightened out of her skull, and their son . . . well, even for a three-year-old, it was never an easy thing to discern how much he was picking up on. Sometimes Reese saw and noticed and focused. Other times he looked right through you, as if the limits of his interest fell short before he could even notice you were there. Like now. Or ten years from now, maybe. Make it forty. They hadn't yet found a single doctor willing to promise that their boy would ever say a word, or seal the Velcro on his shoes, or even comprehend that he couldn't.

Maybe it was just the quarantine glass today. Whatever was on the other side of so much glass didn't matter to him, wasn't really there.

If this were a moment in a movie, Beryl would have reached for him,

splaying her hand on the glass, and he would mirror her. Prison devotion. But he knew better, that life made liars of screenwriters all the time. Beryl looked at the glass between them as if it might not be enough.

“I’m fine. This is just a precaution,” Tanner told her. “Whatever was wrong with Daphne’s boyfriend, I don’t think it was catching.”

“You’re not sure, though.” Beryl shifted Reese from one hip to the other. “What happened to him? Nobody’s telling me anything.”

“They’re still trying to figure that out.”

He could follow the war on her face. Beryl wanted to believe him but could extend her trust only so far. He’d already infected her long ago with the unfairness of things, one story of his day at a time. She should never have asked if she didn’t really want to know—sometimes rescues didn’t have happy endings. Sometimes you carried corpses off mountains. Sometimes you brought down live ones and dead ones together, and had to humor the survivors who didn’t believe what had happened. Fools might emerge unscathed and the people who got in their way might not. Sometimes people who needed help the most resented you, like you were the one who’d fucked it all up for them. They resisted. They dug in and refused to cooperate. They acted like people who wanted to die.

Then he realized: Reese. You didn’t yank a three-year-old out of day care and bring him to a hospital for his own sake. The only reason Tanner could imagine she would’ve done so was because whoever called her had implied they might be in a race for him to see his son one last time.

As she got the two of them settled into a chair along the wall across from him, to wait for whatever came next, he finally got it: that Beryl had been living with this possibility for a long time.

They call it survivor’s guilt: when you come out of something alive that others didn’t. Months or years or a lifetime of asking, why me? What’s so special about

me? What did I do to deserve being spared and not them?

Only I didn't feel that. I just got good at lying about it, so people wouldn't think something even worse was wrong with me. Most of the doctors bought it, too. One saw through it. That was a relief, actually . . . somebody I didn't have to pretend with.

In my own weird way, instead I was wondering why I couldn't have gone the rest of the journey with the earlier nine kids. Why did I have to stay behind, stuck here in this world of miseries? There were times when I envied them. They didn't know what they were missing, and some days that seemed like a good deal.

If Wade Shavers had told me it would've been better that I'd never been born, then he probably told the rest of them the same thing. They were all better off now than I was. Later on I imagined the rest of them in their secret graves in the little woods by his house, not the least bit aware that worms and beetles were crawling through them. When the recovery teams dug them up, they wouldn't know it was happening, and their spirits wouldn't grumble—*Do I have to? Just five more minutes, okay?*—because their spirits were gone.

Instead of putting the past further and further behind me, I couldn't stop thinking about these kids. We'd never met, but we had so much in common. Our lives had all led to this exact same point, repeated over and over.

They came to be siblings to me as much as Tanner was. Seven girls and two boys, two pretty little boys. I wanted to learn what I could about them, but then there wasn't a lot to know. None of them had had time to do much living between the cradle and the grave. Even the oldest among us had barely started school. We all liked dolls and games and coloring books and *Sesame Street* and *Power Rangers*.

We'd all been roughly the same age when Shavers grabbed us, but over time, a funny thing happened in my perception. The rest of them stayed the same while I got older. So now I was their big sister. I could imagine myself an old woman, gray-haired and wrinkled if I got that far, still with this brood of siblings who'd never made it past second grade. They'd be tagging along with me my whole life. It would've been better if none of us had been born, but we were, and

ever since, I was the one supposed to live for all of us.

So I took an interest. It could've been a sociology assignment if I'd taken that in high school: The Survivor Project.

The mothers were the ones most eager to talk. The dads, those who were still around, not so much. Or maybe they would've liked to talk if calcified grief hadn't left them so inarticulate at expressing anything more than basic misgivings over this lump in their heart, this stone that wouldn't pass.

But the moms? God, yes. Once I got through introducing myself at the front door, they took me in and hugged me like I was long-lost family. I started off afraid they might hate me for not dying, but they never did. I was like a living connection to the worst best thing they'd ever lost. I was the human potential still in the process of being fulfilled, a future that could've been.

With every one of them, the impression I got was that their extended families and friends, everyone they knew, had been willing to soothe their grief for a time, but then reached a point where they didn't want to hear about it anymore. Time to move on, don't you think? I was amazed these nine women never got together for their own private support group.

But then here I showed up, all ears, asking to know whatever they felt like sharing about the daughter or son they'd lost. They'd talk as long as I listened. I'd listen as long as they wanted to talk. For them, their babies were, if not alive, still a living presence, and none of them wanted it any other way.

Yes, dolls and games and coloring books and *Sesame Street* and *Power Rangers* . . . but then, I'd also hear about the details that distinguished each one from the rest.

Deena Lynn Rowe was, almost from the beginning, such an agile little monkey and escape artist that she one day got out of her crib, then underneath it, where she kicked upward until it came apart and got wedged against the closed door, the barricade so snug her father had to go in through a window.

Jacinta Rocha was a born veterinarian. She brought home every stray animal that would let her hold it. She made them beds, and when they needed it, nursed them with a devotion that made Saint Francis seem like a slacker.

They all had their stories. They all had their defining traits. They'd all

seemed to have their uniquely separate paths that abruptly terminated for no reason that made sense to anyone other than the balding monster at the end of them.

But then there was Brodie Baxter. There was a side of him completely unlike all the rest. Even his mother had to admit that, and didn't know what to make of it.

Brodie Baxter definitely wasn't like other children.

The hospital kept Tanner overnight for observation and more tests, and for a visit by specialists who'd flown in from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They grilled him with the relentlessness of homicide investigators about the half-hour he'd spent with Val. No detail was too trivial.

He wasn't sure if it was a valid impression, or paranoid exhaustion kicking in, when he couldn't shake the feeling that they must have seen this before. Maybe not often, but they had. He was almost as sure that he wasn't adding anything new to their knowledge base, other than a victim developing a taste for cell phones.

By morning, after a mostly sleepless night, there was nothing left to do but discharge him. He still tested fine. His vitals remained good and he'd never developed a single abnormal symptom. There had been no chemical or biological anomalies found in the house, on anyone's clothing, in Val's neighborhood at large.

Or, he figured, in the stewpot of Val's remains.

On their way back home, Beryl dropped him off in Broomfield to retrieve his truck, and he followed her the last few miles to Lafayette, trying not to nod off at the wheel and snuff himself in the most mundane way possible.

There was no sleep at home, either. He hovered in that torturous state of being too tired for it, his mind racing too fast. When they put Reese down for a nap, Tanner kissed his forehead and whispered that he was going to have to sleep

for both of them.

When they stepped out of his room and eased the door shut, Beryl looked nearly as bad as Tanner felt. “You scared ten years off me, you know that?”

She hugged him and he hugged her back, and for a while it felt as if they were holding each other up. She smelled like a hospital and he figured he was worse. Long, hot showers were in the immediate future.

“We need to talk,” she said.

Had any four little words filled him with more dread? *I want a divorce*—he’d never heard that one. *Something’s wrong with Reese*—okay, this ranked at the top. *Cut your sister loose*—he’d been waiting for it for years.

“Daphne gets in trouble, and you run to bail her out,” Beryl said. “She quits a job, and you network to get her another one. She goes missing, and you head off to find her. She has trouble with another jerk boyfriend, and you go put the fear of god into him. She looks like she may be falling off the wagon again, and you go make sure she’s sober.”

True, all true. Repeatedly true.

“Half the time she doesn’t even need it, but you go do it anyway, because you don’t know yet and you don’t trust her to take care of things herself. You’ve trained her *not* to, Tanner, because she knows you won’t be far behind. That’s the one sure thing in her life.”

They made their way back to the family room, where he cleared a path through the toys and sank down onto the couch. He pushed up his flannel sleeves and began yanking away the cotton balls taped over the little red holes where they’d taken blood and, for all he knew, core samples.

Beryl’s hands curled over his forearm to stop him. He hadn’t been gentle. It must have looked as though he were hurting himself, and he supposed he was.

“I get it. You save people’s lives. You find them when they’re lost and evacuate them when they’re hurt. That’s who you are. I love that about you because I know I never have to worry about you being there. I know if I need you, you’ll be there, and there’s nothing you’d let get in your way. Except *her*.”

Beryl had a subtle way with a dagger sometimes.

It made him think of an Ethics 101 challenge. *You’re in a sinking boat with*

two people you love. You can save only one. Who is it? His cocky nineteen-year-old self's rebuttal: *What makes you assume I haven't made sure years ago that they both know how to swim?*

It had seemed so clear then. And inconceivable that some people might refuse to learn how. Or would let themselves forget. Or could only measure your love by sinking to the mud and counting how long it took you to make the dive.

Beryl rubbed his arm again and let it go. "But all that is still your day job. You shouldn't have to bring it home with you. You've got a right to be off the clock. And my needing you shouldn't have to come down to an emergency. Sometimes I need you for nothing special. Sometimes I just need that other heartbeat close by, you know?"

He drew her near, both of them marinating in the hospital miasma of illness, cleansers, and despair. He kept his mouth shut. She needed to be heard, and anything he could have said in defense, Beryl knew already. It was as much a part of his makeup as his DNA and calluses: that he'd been twelve once, and had left a six-year-old alone and unwatched, knowing he was wrong but doing it anyway, and then the monsters had come sniffing. Just one, but one was all it took. He'd never been able to imagine a day when it would feel like his responsibility for that was over.

"Let me just see it through, this one more time. This one feels different," he said. "Then I'll lay it out for her the way you've laid it out here. You're right, I've never led her to expect anything different. But I can't spring it on her in the middle of some crisis and leave her to figure it out for herself."

He could feel the tension ripple between them, the flex in Beryl's shoulders.

"If I was capable of doing that," he said, because Beryl wasn't the only one with a dagger at the ready, "then I wouldn't be the man you think I am."

Brodie Baxter was the only victim whose body Wade Shavers burned.

He burned away as much as he could, then took the charred little bones and

whatever else wouldn’t reduce any more, and ground them to flakes and fragments, and scattered them out in the woods over so wide an area you couldn’t say the poor boy had an actual resting place.

This was a peculiar deviation in pattern. Shavers was a monster of the highest order, whose crimes provoked the most appalled reactions possible. But if you could step back from the raw emotions, you’d realize how unusual that was. Monsters are usually pretty consistent in their methods.

Up to that point, he’d murdered four little girls and buried all of them. Once he’d moved them to his little woodland grove, he laid them out nicely considering the circumstances. Rather than carelessly dumping them into holes, he treated them with a tenderness he’d denied them in their last hours. He did the same with his final four. If he’d been able to finish with me, I don’t doubt he would have given me a proper burial, too.

But not Brodie.

What the fuck, Wade? Seriously, what was up with that?

Shavers never gave a satisfactory answer.

Brodie’s mother showed me plenty of pictures of him, and he was a pretty little boy, slight of frame, with big wide green eyes and silky brown hair to his shoulders. He’d been adamant that haircuts . . . didn’t hurt, exactly, but left him feeling muddled. *Moozy*, that was his made-up word for it.

Had Shavers mistaken him for a girl, then tried extra hard to erase that mistake? Or had he known all along, but felt less inhibition to further violate the body of a boy than a girl, once they were gone? Because, you know, that brick stove in his toolshed wasn’t so big it could hold an entire seven-year-old. Brodie had to go in in pieces.

But then, Shavers hadn’t done the same with the second boy. For Anthony Dispenza, it was business as usual four feet under.

Whatever his reasons, Shavers wouldn’t say. He never explained, but his jailers and lawyers later said it was the one episode that bothered him, although not for any sensible reason. Nothing like remorse ever came out of him. He still believed he was doing us a favor. More like he was confused by Brodie and couldn’t sort out why.

Shavers claimed that it took him a long time to cry, and that he'd been fascinated with the tools. Brodie pointed at one and showed every sign of recognizing it, while still quibbling about finer points of its design. It was like what they'd used for his first harvest, he said, only not as thick as that one, because you couldn't use little ones to get through the ventral stalk. What Brodie was pointing at was a pruning hook.

Shavers' perverse conclusion was that Brodie was telling him, in a roundabout way, that this was the tool he wanted used on him. When Wade started to oblige, Brodie laughed and said, "No, you silly. Lower. They always start lower."

This was Shavers' version of events, anyway. Some thought he was making it up as a rationalization, the way predators will tell you how their victims actually wanted it. Or throwing it out there as the foundation for an insanity plea. Both made sense, but then why didn't he expand the story to include any of the others? What he'd had to say about the rest of us was more or less what you would expect.

The very last person I expected that to make sense to was Brodie's mom, Delia. She believed Shavers, she told me during my second visit, hesitantly, like she'd wanted to share that with someone for a long time but had gotten too used to not trusting anybody.

Brodie was always coming out with peculiar things, Delia told me. Which kids will do, but his were above and beyond. From as soon as he could talk, and even before that, going by her experience with her two older children and her friends' kids, she had suspected that something was seriously off-axis about Brodie.

Outside, as a baby not yet a year old, he would stare at the sky as if it bothered him, even on days when there were no birds around to frighten him—if that was even the problem—and there was nothing to see but pure blue. When he learned to talk and ask questions, he asked why it was that color. A normal question, until, dissatisfied with her answer, he said it was wrong, then pointed at the orange of Tigger on his Winnie-the-Pooh blanket and said, "That. That's right color."

He'd surprised her at night, too, a year later, when he seemed to believe they were pulling a joke on him, and asked, with the earnest conviction of a child, where the other moon was. When he was five, learning about basic constellations and highly talkative by now, he informed her that the stars were in all the wrong places.

It got weirder. He would stand on the open ground, eyes closed and his legs squeezed together, and sway gently, even blissfully, with every breeze. At various times he pointed at his toes and asked when they would grow, for real. The biggest battles his parents ever had with him were getting him to wear shoes. The idea of shoes repelled him to a pathological degree.

Brodie's quirks and observations peaked around age five, then began to taper off, although he would still pop out with an oddity from time to time. After sleep or during stress were the most likely occasions. It was as if something in him was fading, losing a long, slow struggle as he became a more normal boy, but rousing to rally every so often.

"What did you make of it all?" I asked Delia.

She told me how she'd read as many stories as she could find about children remembering what could be construed as past lives. It happened all over the world, kids freaking out their parents by telling solemn stories about going down in flaming planes or drowning on sinking ships, or simply about the children they themselves used to have. They'd point at birthmarks: a round one, *here's where they shot me*; a straight one, *here's where they stabbed me*.

Jesus, I thought at the time. What kind of horrible birthmarks were my spirit-siblings going to be covered with if they came back?

Sometimes these children provided enough details that research proved there really was such a person as they were describing. Names, places, dates, events, relatives—they knew obscure, decades-old details they should've had no way of knowing.

But it never lasted. Once they reached five or six or so, they would lose all memory of it. The connection was cut. It was like they'd been born with one foot in the current time, and the other foot in an earlier time, and little by little they stepped the rest of the way through.

It brought her some peace, Delia told me. She hadn't believed in reincarnation before, but now she did. Brodie had taught her to. By the time I met Delia, he'd been gone eleven years, plenty of time to get back into the world. Maybe even now he was telling some new woman about the mother who'd cuddled him and loved him before.

You can't argue with a bereaved mom who's found her solace, even though I was seventeen at the time, and arguing was what I did best. I was sitting side-by-side with Delia on her sofa, thinking, yeah, but . . . two moons? An orange sky? A ventral stalk, whatever that meant?

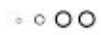
What the fuck, Brodie? Seriously, what was up with all that?

Sometimes the memories got scrambled, Delia told me, the only time I ever saw her get defensive.

Sure, I told her. They probably do. That's probably it.

I didn't push it.

I especially didn't tell her that the man who'd murdered her son had shoved my head into the stove where he'd cremated the body, because he seemed to think there was still something in there, left behind, that maybe I could find.



Tanner managed some sleep that afternoon, lasting deep into evening. Once he was up and around again, awakening to a blackened sky and a moon like a scythe, everything felt off. He was wide awake and restless enough to prowl when he should have been winding down.

He still had tasks left undone. Every fiber of him knew it.

He went for the grab bag of Daphne's phones and carried it out onto the back porch. Then settled onto the cushions of a wooden lawn chair and picked up where he'd left off yesterday while in quarantine.

High-end earbuds this time. With them in, the trees beyond the porch, and the night beyond the trees, went silent. Now he was immersed in them, these puzzling calls Daphne had archived by the hundreds, each one a forty-seven

second soundscape of burbling noise with that sharp resonance that led like the edge of a blade trying to cut through the static. The secondary sound behind it, a voice too indistinct to make out, struggled like a face pushing against a membrane until it might break through.

Whoever it was, whatever they wanted, they hadn't given up. Their obsession was total. It carried from phone to phone, month to month, one number to the next, for two years. Whoever this was always found her no matter what she tried, and in those jumbled letters, symbols, whatever they were, left no trace of identity.

Attila? Going by purely baseless assumptions, this level of harassment sounded like the sort of thing an Attila would do . . . except it predated Daphne's involvement with him. There was no sign of him this early in the sequence. He didn't appear until the fifth phone, just another contact: Attila Csonka. He would keep until later.

By the last dozen calls on phone number five, Tanner was starting to make out words, the first ones to pierce the sonic veil by the sheer power of repetition: *they . . . you . . . yours . . . know . . .*

They had no context yet, but he felt confident that context was coming. Whatever the message was, it had the cadence of a chant, a mantra, a verse from some text. Her fifth phone was where it really started to take form. The closer it came, the more loathsome it felt, a sensation not unlike the revulsion that had slithered through him when Val had grabbed him by the shoulder. He couldn't explain it then, and couldn't now. There was only the conviction that he was hearing something that shouldn't be heard, the utterances of a throat that should've remained closed.

He stopped skipping through the recordings five at a time and started listening in exact sequence. With every iteration, their source seemed to take another step closer through mists and distances, as if it had locked onto its target, until the message was as unambiguous as the voice relaying it. The voice felt wrong in ways he couldn't pinpoint. Wrong in the way a whisper coming from the back of a cave at 13,000 feet, in winter, would sound wrong.

They are yours to kill.

They are yours to kill for us.

They are yours to kill for yourself.

They are yours to kill for the sake of your world.

A rasping sound that scraped at his ear, it felt . . . inhuman. Like the mistaken notion of a human voice attempted by something with a need to mimic it. And it was not finished.

You will know them when you sense them.

You will know them when you see them.

You will know them when you feel them.

You will know it is what you were made for when you do.

You will know why when it happens.

Their blood will ensure your eternity.

Once they'd gotten through, they hadn't given up. They had relayed the same message at least another 156 times after that.

It had the deadness of a voice generated by a computer, emotionless and flat. Yet the messages were not digitally precise. They showed disparities from one recording to the next. The pauses between lines that varied. The way the voice stressed particular words, different at times, as if guessing at the nuances of language.

And she'd kept them. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands, and Daphne had kept them all.

After he bagged the phones again, Tanner lingered on the porch for another hour, thinking, yes, Beryl was right again. He shouldn't have brought this home with him. He felt contaminated now, and if he stepped inside too soon, he could spread it to everything he touched. He would go in only when that seemed less of a risk than staying out here long enough for it to seem like a good idea to find a stick to ram into each ear, and swirl it around until he felt clean again.

So what did it mean that, at a time he couldn't have expected it less, came the nearest thing he'd ever experienced to a moment of grace?

As he was staring into the western sky, fate itself seemed to have been listening in, and decided to give him a nudge to make sure he stayed on track. From south to north, a huge flash of green-white fire streaked just above the

peaks of the horizon. A moment later, another half dozen chased after it, then were gone.

Remember your promises, they seemed to say. He'd almost forgotten it, some long-ago night in the backyard when he and Daphne, still teenagers, had each looked up at the right instant to catch the brilliant blue smear of a meteorite directly overhead. Her idea: *No matter where we are or what we're doing, whenever either of us sees a shooting star again, we stop and think of the other, okay? Because the other one may have just seen it, too.*

Even if he had no idea where she was, she still felt that much closer.

What's it like to be the girl who lived?

Twenty-two years ago they carried a live body out of a secluded toolshed, but even though its heart had continued to beat and it hadn't stopped breathing, part of it had died anyway. The original occupant got evicted, and ever since, she drifted around the adjacent woods trying to find the spirits belonging to those now-empty graves, so she could unite with the only friends who could understand. But they'd moved on and she hadn't.

What was left in her place was a changeling. *Me.* This alternate me was something forced into a vessel it had no business occupying. It developed such a connection to the meat it was in that it started to think it belonged, even though it knew down deep it was wrong, an intruder, something that wasn't invited but moved in anyway, like a squatter in an abandoned building.

I wasn't supposed to be this.

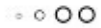
I wasn't supposed to live this life.

I wasn't supposed to have these thoughts.

I wasn't supposed to endure this harassment that keeps catching up with me no matter how much phone shuffling I do to get away from its cold, dead voice.

And even though they mostly healed well enough on the outside, I wasn't supposed to have these scars.

Or if I was, they weren't supposed to have roots that grew all the way in, then out through to some other side that can't be seen, only felt.



It had always been received wisdom: *You've lost something? Well, where was the last place you saw it, the last spot you knew for sure where it was?*

When Tanner thought about it, the only conclusion he could come to was that the Shavers' toolshed was the last place Daphne had been her original self. She got carried in as the intended version of Daphne Gustafson, unmarked, as she'd been born, and by the time she was carried out she was altered and reshaped, the seed of someone else reformulating from the pieces left inside that broken little shell.

Six years old. It wasn't supposed to happen like that. Tanner had barely turned twelve at the time, and even then, he'd known that nothing was ever supposed to happen like that.

The drive up to Fort Collins took less than an hour, but as a trip back in time, it spanned decades. Three blocks down from where they'd grown up, at the terminus of a dead-end street called Cherry Drive—Tanner had never been back here since. The last house on the right had sat empty for more than twenty years, doorways and windows boarded over, a home no realtor could sell. The property remained as private as ever, an amenity that buyers would gladly pay a premium for, but not when they would have to share it with the ghosts of children.

It had been summer then, was autumn now. The oaks were a mellow orange, the maples a blazing red, the birches a creamy yellow, and the nippy air between them was suffused with the golden light of late afternoon. It bit gently, with a promise of winter and the icy teeth to come.

The lawn wasn't nearly as overgrown as Tanner expected. Someone had it mowed every so often—the city, maybe, keeping up marginal appearances. Or maybe Terri Shavers, from whatever anonymous life she'd fled to, reaching back to do her duty for this house she couldn't be rid of. It was two stories of

someone’s American dream built half a century ago, now sealed up like a time capsule, tagged with the kind of graffiti left by a collective wrath that never died.

Around back, he found the toolshed had been broken into, but he supposed that, unseen from the street, there was no way of keeping people out. It would always be irresistible, a haunted spot of local legend. The things that happened here, terrible enough to begin with, would only grow in the telling. At sixteen, he might have pried away the boards and padlocks too, if he didn’t have any connection to the place, just morbid curiosity.

Somebody should’ve torn it down a generation ago, but no one had ever stepped up with the sledgehammers and crowbars to do it. So here it stood, still, like a little cabin of weathered cedar, windowless double doors sprung permanently open, daring you to step inside and tarnish your soul.

Anything that hadn’t been part of the structure itself was long gone. The floor was brick, the same brick that made up the stove that squatted along the back wall like a barbecue pit. A built-in workbench had survived, along with a pegboard bolted to a side wall. On the back, a rustic tool rack remained, parallel wooden slats with a slot in between for hanging hammers, pliers, shears. Everything else had been carted away as evidence or looted long ago. Dead leaves had accumulated in the corners, and cobwebs above. When Tanner flicked his shoe at one of the crumpled beer cans on the floor, it clattered over a smear of cigarette ash ground into the brick.

The graffiti was denser in here, layers of thoughts left by years of bored kids. Who they hated, who they loved. An attempt at summoning spirits lived next to someone’s declaration that Wade Shavers rotted in Hell.

Tanner reached overhead to trace his fingers along the central roof beam until he found a quarter-inch hole left from the bolt where Shavers hung the pulley he used to finish them. Twenty-two years ago, he’d only just hoisted Daphne from the floor and tied off the rope when the police pulled up around front. If they been even two minutes later . . .

He always gagged them for this part, Shavers admitted. Even so, Daphne was still making enough noise that the cops had smashed through the doors. Shavers hadn’t resisted. He merely set his ball-peen hammer down on the

workbench and raised both hands, while Daphne hung from her wrists, bruised and bleeding and abraded, hyperventilating behind the shop rag stuffed into her mouth.

According to the officers' testimony at his trial, Shavers had begged to be allowed to finish. It would be the merciful thing to do, he said . . . and the worst thing in the world Tanner could think of was that, in the years that followed, he'd more than once heard Daphne, at her lowest points, suggest that Shavers was right, and they should've let him swing the hammer before they cuffed him and took him in, the last free act of his last free day on earth.

Tanner squatted in front of the stove, the iron door askew and the opening in the grimed bricks like a mouth, square across the bottom and curved across the top. The interior was shadowed but not so dark he couldn't see the blackened faces of the bricks. They'd scraped out whatever forensics-level residue they could, but could never have scraped it clean.

This was the part nobody knew, that never came up at the trial, because Shavers hadn't mentioned it, and Daphne hadn't remembered until hypnosis, a decade later.

Tanner reached inside, slowly, as if he didn't trust something not to bite. The air within felt oddly cold, colder than the rest of the shed, colder than it should have felt even on a sunny autumn day.

He yanked his hand back as quickly as if he'd been burned when he heard a tapping at the open doors.

Until hypnosis, I hadn't remembered how Wade Shavers had forced me onto my hands and knees on the floor, so he could give me a push and squeeze me head-and-shoulders into his brick stove.

The memory jolted me right out of the trance the first time, because by then, at sixteen, I was already aware that he'd burned one of us. The now-me merged with the then-me, and I had a visceral reaction, experiencing it again but this

time knowing that in this blackened hollow, I was surrounded by the residue of Brodie Baxter. There were still some ashes that were probably his. Some of that charred crust on the sides had to be seared fat. I had to be breathing in his molecules.

This wasn't just Wade Shavers being the sick monster that he was. This wasn't another way he'd come up with to torment me. If it was, you'd think he would have told me what had happened there already. I recalled thinking he must be like the witch from Hansel and Gretel, and begging him to please not cook me. If he'd wanted me any more scared, all he would've had to do was let me know that was a possibility.

What he really was after was, what . . . a second opinion?

Tell me what it's like in there. Tell me the truth and I'll let you come back out.

It stinks!

I already know that. Anybody can tell that. What else?

I didn't know the right answer from the wrong answer, and didn't know what he even wanted to hear or if he would think I was lying because . . .

Because how can the inside of a stove be this cold in the middle of summer? Not all of it, not even most of it, just this one spot floating near the back. It's too dark to see, so it's not a flame back in there but it's starting to burn anyway. This spot on my cheek is starting to feel like I'm holding an ice cube to it, or I've pressed it to a flagpole on a winter day, until it's lost the feeling. It's more than being stuck, like licking the pole. It's pulling at my skin, too, like the way the bare nozzle of the vacuum cleaner feels when I put my hand over the end, and as I twist my head around trying to make it stop burning I have to squeeze my eye shut because if I don't, it's going to take my eyeball.

And I know the mean man is still there, I can feel his heavy arm on my waist and his big sweaty hand spread wide, high up on my back. His every finger is like a branch grown into my bones to hold me in place. But I can't hear him anymore. My head is so far away now that my ears can't hear anything from behind me at all. I can hardly hear myself breathe or cry or try to tell him what it's like in here. It's so quiet that the quiet is its own sound and blocks out everything, and I'm afraid if he holds me here much longer my eye's going to go

first and the rest of me is going to follow like a big long string of spaghetti. Whatever's inside here is going to suck me right into it.

I don't want that to happen, don't want to go there. And yet . . . I do. At least it seems like it might lead to a place where the hurting stops. But maybe there's no one there to hurt because there's no one there at all, not ever, and that might be worse.

Then he yanks me back out, and he's looking at my cheek, surprised, like what's this, how did this happen?

I'll be good. That's what I tell him. *I don't want to be cooked. I'll be good.*

He has a way of laughing that isn't really laughing.

Never mind that. I can't keep a fire lit in there any more. Even when all I want to do is keep warm. Not since . . . He keeps blowing it out. It's okay. There's other things we can do.

And we did.

Sitting there safe in one of Dr. Hannover's comfy chairs, all that coming back to me fresh, with the dirt and ash and grease wiped off it, I realized that Wade Shavers may have done that to each one of us he'd taken since Brodie. Get in there, you. What in the name of creation did that weird little brat leave behind?

For a moment, he and the elderly woman in the doorway stared at each other, Tanner feeling the guilt of having been caught in the act, any act. Was it breaking-and-entering when the doors were already wide open?

"You're the Gustafson boy, aren't you?" she finally said.

He hadn't expected recognition. Their parents had moved them within months, putting eighty miles between themselves and Cherry Drive.

"Used to be, I guess."

"I'm Mrs. Ramseger. From across the street and down one. I saw you through my front window. But you don't look like the usual kind of trouble that

comes creeping around over here. Thought I'd better check before calling the police again."

She wore jeans and a baggy sweatshirt, and though weathered and crinkled, with hair gone to snow, she looked fit and trim, the sort of woman intent on somebody one day having to pry her garden spade from her cold, dead hands.

"You probably don't remember me. I used to watch you kids growing up from driving past your house on the way down here. And there was a mob of you that used to come trick-or-treating down this far."

The recollections stuttered out of the past: a middle-aged couple who thought enough of Halloween and free candy that they put out a huge annual display of jack-o-lanterns and cardboard tombstones and ghosts hanging from the trees. No kid could pass up an invitation like that, and the payoff was always grade-A.

"I remember," Tanner said. "So you never moved away? Most people wouldn't want to get up every morning and look at this place across from them."

Mrs. Ramseger ran one hand, thin-skinned and veiny, along the doorjamb. "We talked about it, me and the mister. But what we decided was that, once it was emptied, the place needed looking out for more than we felt like we needed to get clear of it. Nothing wrong with *our* home, so why let this one drive us out of it?"

She looked at a spot on the ground.

"I spent those first few years cutting flowers and bringing them over. Setting them right outside this door here, and out there where the yard stops and the woods begin. I probably shouldn't have fallen out of the habit."

She looked up again, at the trees beyond, as if the graves remained.

"They still deserve their flowers, don't you think?"

"I don't know. I think it's easier for the dead to move on than the living."

"Let's hope that's true." She patted her chest, a hollow sound from behind the sweatshirt. "Me and my ticker both. But you, now . . . I don't know how long a trip it was for you, but I know it had to be more than a walk across the street to get here."

She eyed him then, unblinking and expecting no answers, just leaving him with a smile, something sad about it, the smile of a woman who wished her

memories could never be worse than the bittersweet kind, of giving candy to children who merely grew up and moved away, and never had a need to find their way back.

"You take your time. As much as you need. And a little bit later I'll see if I can't find a few flowers to leave behind for . . . whoever might need them. In case it would do some good for someone to know they never were forgotten. That they're still prayed for, if they go for that sort of thing. Or even if they don't."

"Thank you," he whispered. "I'll tell her so, when I see her."

Because he couldn't bring himself to say *if*.

As Mrs. Ramseger left him to himself, he wanted this promise she'd made to mean something, a meaning beyond the act itself: that she would choose a few flowers for their beauty and take a blade to their stems to sever them from what sustained them, then drop them at a door that had concealed the murders of children, where they would wither and brown and decay, and no one would know or care, and it wouldn't make one bit of difference.

Tanner hunkered down by the stove again, reaching inside to fish around the empty space. A chill came over his hand, and a faint sensation like a tugging on the skin.

Daphne had spoken of this sensation, ten years later, and he'd never believed her. Because it came from hypnosis, it was always going to be suspect, a memory glued into place by suggestions, or of some unrelated thing that the years had tangled up with what she'd endured here. He believed that Daphne believed, and left it at that.

If Wade Shavers couldn't get a fire going in his stove, that was his own failing. Not because someone or something kept blowing it out.

And yet, even now, a fragment of those days remained behind.

If it really happened the way Daphne had said, this may have explained one thing—not how, but at least what. That summer day they'd carried her out alive, she had a coin-sized burn on her cheek, red and blistering. They'd thought it was just one more torment Shavers had inflicted on her—heating up the ball-peen head of his hammer with his propane torch, maybe, and using it like a brand.

Only, over the next few days, it didn't behave like a heat burn. It turned black, and eventually sloughed away to reveal healing pink skin beneath.

It behaved, the hospital staff said, like frostbite.

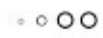
On one side of the boxy brick stove, a lever jutted out, iron with a handle of wood. It was up now, the flue open. Tanner bore his weight down on it until the corrosion gave with a screech and the damper closed to seal off the chimney.

He gathered handfuls of the season's brittle leaves and dropped them inside, then set fire to them with a lighter. They blazed and curled until there was nothing left to burn. The smoke, unable to rise through the flue, should have lingered, and at first, it did . . . until he saw that it was clearing, regardless, vanishing via some point near the center. It drifted slowly inward as if pulled, like someone's trick with a cigarette. For a moment he saw the spot itself, the size of an acorn, a sphere hazy and indistinct at the edges, but denser toward its center, then along with the last of the leaf smoke, the sight of it was gone.

He could still feel it, though. The cold remained.

He could believe now, not only that it existed, but that it had been more potent once. He could believe it had left its imprint on Daphne when she was six, a permanent mark, a wound that had tried to heal, but could never entirely mend from the cold, dry pull of its touch.

His heart ached to think that, on the inside, it must have been pulling at her ever since.



I'm the kind of customer that the makers of beauty products love: one they don't seem able to help, but who keeps coming back anyway. As long as there's hope, there are debit card receipts.

This round patch of dry skin on my left cheek, where I got cold-burned in Wade Shavers' stove . . . there's not a moisturizer, humectant, or emollient made that seems able to soothe it, smooth it, and plump it. It laughs at shea butter. It guzzles petroleum jelly. It sucks down $100 an ounce boutique creams

synthesized from the centrifuged stem cells of specially bred virgins descended from pure Atlantean bloodlines, and says, “Yummy! What else ya got?”

I’ve carried it ever since. Two decades hasn’t made any difference. Everything else healed up well enough that by the time I was no longer jailbait, I could wear a bikini and you’d really have to look to see anything remaining of the scars.

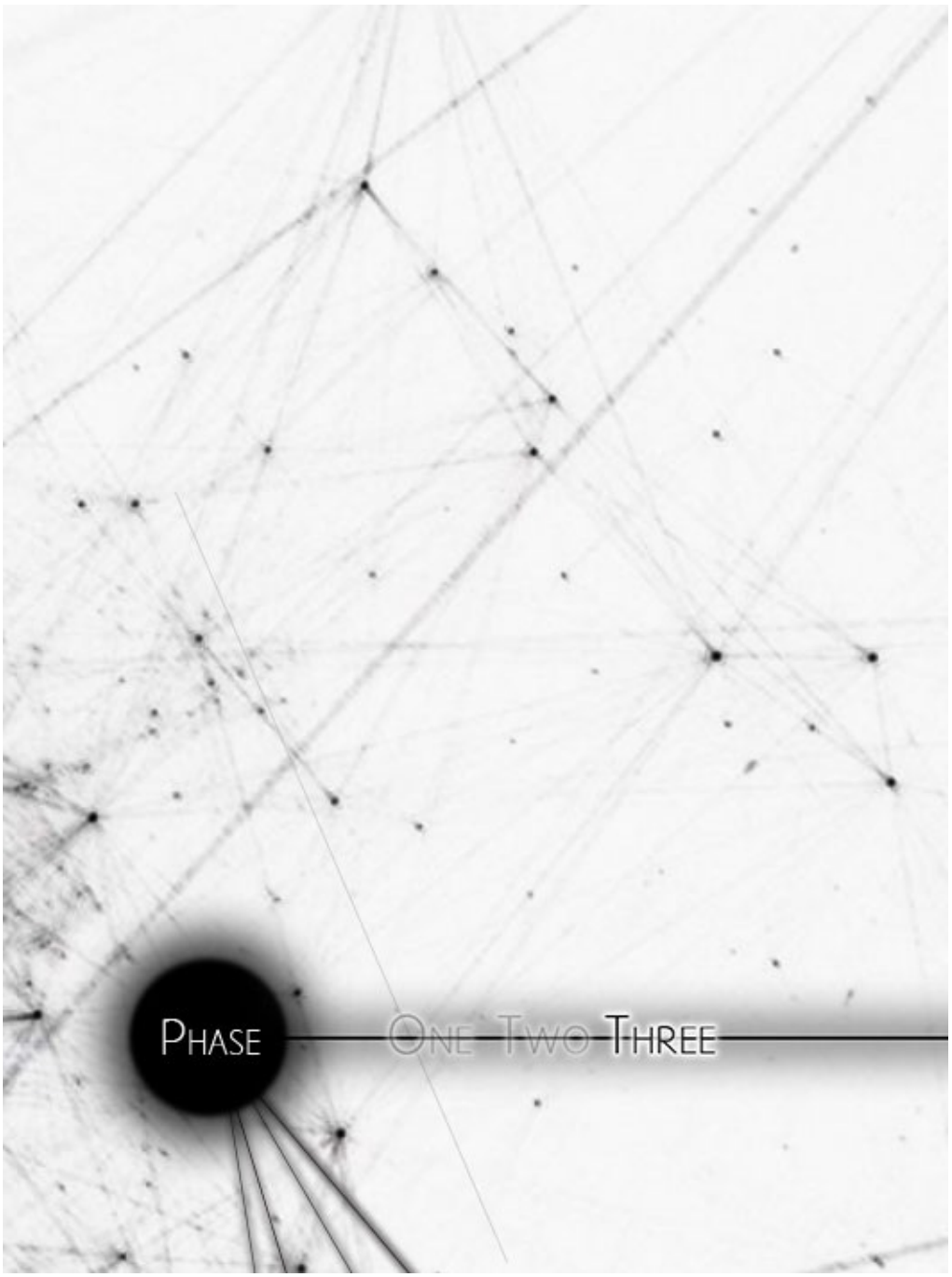
But not this. Not this stupid patch of dry skin the size of a nickel where I got shoved up against a frozen orb I couldn’t see, only feel. The oil factories of puberty didn’t faze it. It’s a scar that time left alone.

It’s how I first learned the word *psychosomatic*. But hypnosis was as ineffective at treating it as everything else.

The spot remembers.

They said Wade Shavers was careful about not marking up his kiddie-captives’ faces. Everything below our necks was fair game, and he was known to bash the back of a skull or two, but he didn’t want to mess up the cute. Proving, I suppose, that even monsters have a sense of aesthetics.

As long as I can’t clear it up, this problem spot is my triumph over him. I got the last laugh, Wade. See this? You slipped up and left a mark. Behold my dermal scales, you evil fucker, and despair.


PHASE
ONE TWO THREE

It will seem as though nature should extinguish the human race, for it will be useless to the world and will bring destruction to all created things.
—Leonardo da Vinci

We met at yoga. As you do.

Later, I told myself it was all my idea, that I finally started going to yoga after years of meaning to, and this much is true. It always seemed like an obvious fix, if only I'd get around to it. There are parts of me, muscles and joints, that always felt too tight, a condition I blamed on the damage I took that afternoon in the toolshed, the way I got to conveniently blame everything on the toolshed.

Even I think I relied on this too much. This thing nobody could argue with. When you've got a weapon like that, which instantly invalidates anyone else's position, you get hooked on using it, like some kind of emotional Oxycontin. Sorry, Mom, I can't do my chores today. The toolshed, you know. Sorry, I can't deal with the stress of final exams this week. Or be expected to refrain from helping myself to your boyfriend. It's the toolshed again. Apologies, but I can't love you back the way you want me to. Can't make it to work today. Can't stick to that promise of fidelity. Can't quit binge drinking this month. It's that goddamn toolshed, don't you see?

You know what? Fuck the toolshed, just once, okay? Maybe I was born stiff, and that's that. So, yoga. At long last, yoga. Look at me, taking initiative, all proactive and shit.

But then again . . .

There's always a *but* with me. Was this really my idea after all? Could it instead have been something slipped into my mind that I just took credit for?

Yoga for Beginners, Stiff People Edition. Can't my harassers even let me have that much for myself?

Yoga is like anyplace you keep going back to. After enough sessions of downward dogging and crocodilation and thinking unkind thoughts about your own muscles, you get past your self-absorption and start to notice the regulars. You recognize the same miserable faces. Some you ignore and you each know that's the way it will always be and that's fine.

Others, though . . . what is it that keeps you glancing at them? What is it that makes you think, hmm, I'd like to get to know her? What is it that assures you it's okay to hold eye contact, that makes you smile and know it won't be taken wrong, that nobody's hitting on each other? It's a *namaste* thing—the suffering fool on my mat acknowledges the suffering fool on yours.

Next, exchange a few words after class and then, finally, the thing you never in a million years thought you'd hear come out of your mouth: *So, would you like to get a chai or something?*

Who even says that? Yoga people, apparently. My idea of yoga people, even if it left me feeling like an autistic serial killer trying to blend in by mimicking things she's heard other people say.

So that was how I first got to know Bianca. I couldn't explain why I felt so drawn to her, at a level that was almost embarrassing, like something your friends would tease you about if you were little: Daphne and Bianca, sitting having tea, T-A-L-K-I-N-G. Go with it for once, I decided, and Bianca was there already, like our fledgling gabfest was the most natural thing in the world.

We spent the first few sips commiserating about being stiffs in a limber world of Yoga Barbies, and within five minutes I knew all about the car wreck she was in when she was eighteen. Me, I held back. You don't lead with a thing like the toolshed.

I found it easier to tell her that I'd always wished I looked more like her. Those times I dyed my hair black? Not once had it come close to looking like what unfurled naturally from her scalp. Her skin, that light creamy brown?

Gimme. And by now I was pretty much over boob envy, but, oh, there was a time . . .

Bianca had enough grace to laugh it off and flip it around, how I was the one blessed by genetics, with all the attributes she'd grown up seeing paraded in front of her as the ideal. Blonde? Check. Blue eyes? Check. Slender? Check? Tall? Well, it's all relative, right?

"It's always what you don't have that you want," she told me. "I bet you never once said your prayers and said, 'Thank you for making me a Valkyrie.'"

God, this woman knows how to flatter.

So it was probably good that I capped it when I did, before getting into how much I liked her thighs, her thick smooshy thighs, because no woman is supposed to want bigger thighs. But Bianca looked strong, was the thing. I loved how strong she looked, like a woman from a Frank Frazetta painting in one of Attila's art books. Like with those shapely, mare-like haunches of hers, she could've kicked Wade Shavers through a wall.

Yet for all our differences, I found something about her so familiar that I knew it would always nag me if I didn't pursue it. Again, what is this thing that makes you pick somebody out on a city sidewalk, or across a crowded room, and think, *That one. That person, right there. Apart from all others, this one, this stranger who seems like something more.*

Some would call it pheromones. Others, chemistry. Vibe entanglement.

Me, in this instance, I would call it scary fucking manipulative fate.

By the time the last of our chai was cool in the bottom of our cups, I was starting to get this situation figured out.

"You remind me of somebody," I told her. "Somebody from a long time ago. You're the first person who ever has."

Bianca looked like she didn't know whether to be flattered or suspicious, but was willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. Probably she was thinking it was a teacher, an old friend, a favorite cousin I'd fallen out of touch with. Who, she asked.

"His name was Brodie. Brodie Baxter."

There was a risk in giving her the name. All us toolshed kids were national

news for a while, although they kept me under wraps during those media-frenzied weeks, because (a) child, (b) survivor, and (c) nobody could promise this early that Wade Shavers didn't have a creepy admirer who might scuttle out from beneath some woodpile to finish me off.

But Brodie? Conceivably, Bianca could've remembered. And if she did, she would have every right to be spooked. No risk, no reward, though, right?

His name didn't click. It just wasn't what she was expecting.

"A guy? I remind you of some guy?" She sounded incredulous, a little disappointed.

"He was a boy. A little boy, a very special one. His parents didn't really know what to make of him. He was always coming out with the most unusual things. Like he wasn't quite of this world."

Apparently that hit home, meant something. Bianca's beautiful dark eyes got wider, even her pupils, like on an animal level of survival she knew she had to take in as much as she could of whatever came next.

"Brodie had this amazing air about him. It felt like the same thing that comes off of you."

"What happened to him?"

I slid my hand across the tabletop and over hers, and she was mine then, and she felt amazing, the way I'd imagine it would feel if you could pet a lion and a unicorn and a giant redwood tree all at once.

"He was too good for this world. Too pure, I think. So he left," I said. "He left behind a little round hole."

The call came an hour past dawn, before Tanner was ready for it, but you didn't get to pick and choose when people ran into trouble. While out freestyling solo in a two-mile trench of inhospitability known as Cottonwood Canyon, a climber named Josh Kozak had trapped himself on a sandstone ledge twice the size of a skateboard. He couldn't ascend any farther, and since he'd made it onto the

ledge by a sideways leap, didn't feel he could safely downclimb now that he was there. If he dropped and missed the grab on the narrow lip of rock he'd launched from, he was looking at a 260-foot plummet onto more rocks.

His nerve was gone, and so was his phone. Josh had fumbled it before he could make his first call for help, condemning himself to wait until a pair of campers hiked close enough to hail with what remained of his parched voice. He'd been stuck there for the entirety of the first afternoon, all day yesterday, and the past two nights.

He'd been just smart enough to recognize his limits. The rest was all stupid, getting himself into this fix with no rope, no companions, and neglecting to tell anyone where he was going.

Tanner went in after him with a team of three others, a few hundred feet of rope, an extra harness and helmet, and several pounds of food, water, medical supplies, and anything else they might need. They knew the location, knew the cliff face. Josh was trapped nearer the top than the base. It would go faster and easier getting him from above than working their way up to him from below.

They took the helicopter into the canyon and, half a mile away, set down in a clearing long enough to drop in Camille, so she could hike the rest of the way, let Josh know they'd arrived, and brief him on what to expect over the next half-hour. While she covered the ground, they lifted off again and swung wide, coming at the cliff from the backside, to keep the rotor downwash away from its face.

They set down atop the ridge on a flat, bald patch of stony ground forty yards back from the edge, as close as the pilot was comfortable getting to the scrubby pines that grew closer to the drop-off. He cut the turbines and the hush of the wilderness closed in. It was as ideal a day as they could've asked for. The sky was a clear, deep blue, the sun was high enough that it was out of the glare zone, with no rain in sight and the wind rarely topping five miles per hour.

Boots on the ground, Tanner and the other two anchored ropes to a pair of winches mounted on the side of the chopper. They made for the edge, past the sparse line of pines left gnarled by the elements, trunks corkscrewed by growing into decades of wind. He and Shawn, the other climber up for this morning's

heavy lifting, played out their lengths of rope toward the rim, then unfurled them over the cliff, feeding one down on either side of the ledge that had been Josh's home for the past forty-four hours.

Peering over, they saw the top of his head, ninety feet below. When they called down to him that they were coming, minutes away, Josh glanced up and they could see his face was the color of a brick.

Forty-four sunburned hours on that ledge had to take a toll. No deep sleep—a few moments snatched here and there, at best. Maybe an energy bar to eat this entire time. His water probably hadn't lasted long, and in the dry air, 24% humidity last time Tanner checked, he would've been ready to suck dew out of a rock by sunrise this morning. Dry it out enough, and the brain started to go funny, dehydration opening the door to delirium.

Tanner backed away from the edge and got on the walkie-talkie to hail Camille, near the base of the cliff. "We're ready to go over. What's your read on this guy? Is he lucid?"

"Lucid enough," Camille said. "But . . . he asked for you. By name."

"Say again?"

"He yelled down asking if you were going to be the one coming for him. Tanner Gustafson. He knew your name. Don't ask me how."

"And you're positive about this." He sounded more tense than he wanted to. He was supposed to be everybody's rock. "That doesn't make sense."

"Take it up with him once you get him off that ledge. It's probably something simple."

"Your reputation precedes you." With a grin, Shawn clapped him on the shoulder. "What happened to 'It's all about the team,' man? I thought there weren't any rock stars here."

"Fuck you. When we're back down, I mean. Fuck you then."

"Hostile work environment, I swear."

Tanner rolled his eyes. "Have it your way. Fuck you now."

"Are you sure you can handle this much weight today? Him *and* your ego?"

They each clipped their rope to their harness with carabiners, then into the braking bar to keep the descent under control, and themselves locked in place

when needed. Gloves on, helmets secure, game faces tight. Then they stepped back and over, leaning away from the cliff as they bounced outward and rappelled down, feeding the rope through a few smooth feet at a time.

He asked for you. By name. Puzzling, but Camille had to be right. It would be something simple. Maybe, awhile back, they'd pulled a friend of Josh's out of trouble. Or Josh had seen him quoted in a news story. Or maybe he'd taken a seminar Tanner had given—as director of Rocky Mountain Search & Rescue, safety outreach was a big part of the job —and was embarrassed to admit he'd ignored the basics. Like don't be the moron who doesn't tell anyone where he's going.

Halfway down. To his right, Shawn toed his way around an outcropping shaped like carnassial tooth, then continued the descent.

Then again, after forty-four hours, who even cared who was coming, as long as help was on the way? Maybe, for Josh, this was what delirium looked like: fixating on the little details.

Ten feet to go. "Hang on, Josh. Just stay right the way you are for the next couple minutes. You've done great this whole time. A couple more minutes, and it's all good, brother."

They could see him clearly now. Despite the weathering, the sunburn and cracked lips, he didn't appear to be out of his twenties. His hair was buzzed short, scarcely longer than the two days of stubble on his chin. His fingertips were raw and scabby.

"Just keep your seat a little longer, and what we're going to do—"

Fuck. He stood up. Josh stood up, and they still weren't close enough to grab him.

"Okay," Tanner said. "We'll work with that."

Realistically, Josh had to have been popping up and down the entire time he'd been stuck here, trying to stay comfortable. It didn't matter. Seeing him pop up now was still a scary thing. It meant he wasn't listening. Wasn't processing what he was hearing. This close to rescue, sometimes they got eager and tried to push the schedule, like a drowning victim grappling on and dragging the lifeguard under with them.

Tanner locked his brake and Shawn followed his lead. First thing they had to do was make sure Josh's head was clear, that he wasn't going to make a sudden jump for either of them the moment they were in reach. It had happened before. Someone who's spent too many hours too scared to think straight jumps and grabs the rescuer around the knees, and then things get *really* tense.

"What I need, Josh, is for you to stay absolutely still. Do you understand?"

"You're Tanner, right?" the kid asked.

"That's me. And this lanky guy over on my right is Shawn. While you're staying totally still, he's going to come down the rest of the way to you, and get you fitted into a harness. Sound good?"

"You're Daphne's brother? Is that her name, Daphne? Did I get that right?"

Tanner froze with his hand on the brake and caught the look from Shawn. *This is a new one.* And maybe Shawn caught the look from him. *What is this, really?*

"Let's talk about her later, okay."

"No . . . I think we'd better talk about her now." Josh's voice was a parched rasp, painful to listen to. "I don't know her. But the people who've been talking to me do. They say . . . they want you to leave her alone. They want you to stop looking. She has work to do."

He had no idea what to say to that. Hanging 260 feet above the ground, and he'd gone mute. He was supposed to be the rock. The one who always knew how to proceed. He wasn't the one in charge here at all.

And he'd seen that dazed look on someone before.

"How long have I been up here?"

"Over forty hours. Long enough," Shawn said. "We can talk about all this after we—"

"No, that can't be right." Josh furiously scrubbed his hand around his chin and cheeks. "You see a lot from up here. At night, the whole sky opens up and you see how lost you really are. It feels like it's been . . . lifetimes."

Tanner found his voice again, knew he shouldn't pursue this but couldn't help himself. "Who's been talking to you? What people?"

Another look from Shawn: *What are you doing? Don't indulge him, man.*

Don't encourage this.

"The ones who walk the webs. The ones who come from the gaps. The . . ." Josh appeared to be scrabbling for a word every bit as fiercely as his raw fingers must have clawed for a tenuous hold. "The Ginnunga Gaps. They say they met you the other day. But the vessel was imperfect. And weak."

Lost, Josh had said. That was the feeling. Hundreds of feet in the air, where he'd always been comfortable, but feeling instead as though he had awakened from a fugue state in a vast trackless plain, sunless and gray, no east or west, and no one to tell him where he was. Just lost.

"They want me to pull you off that rope. I told them I didn't think I could do that."

Purely lost.

"So now they want me to ask you if I make as big a mess as he did."

Shawn was on it first, releasing his brake and letting the rope whiz through as he bounced out and down again, steadying his drop with one hand and leaning, reaching, straining with the other. He caught Josh by the shoulder, his t-shirt and a little skin—that was all, and not enough. Josh was already toppling forward, outward, and down, into the emptiness between the ledge and the unforgiving rocks below.

When he hit, no, the mess wasn't as big as Val's, but worse in its way, because Tanner figured he should've seen this one coming sooner.

So, in a tea shop, over the mortifying cliché of a post-yoga chai . . . that was how I made my new best friend Bianca. It was like there was a shortcut working in my favor, this sense of recognition on my part, and for her, a sense of being truly seen, maybe for the first time ever. Not just seen on the surface, but underneath, as deep as deep goes, where the soul gets entwined with the DNA double helix inside the empty spaces between the subatomic particles that never stop winking in and out of existence, in two states at once.

There are encounters that feel random and accidental, and others that feel fated to happen, and then there was this one, a whole new level of destiny, like the earth had twitched its crust to nudge the two of us together. It was what I'd always heard love was supposed to feel like, but never had, not for me.

But this? This was real. I just didn't know why.

At home, I kept quiet about it around Val, because I knew my girl-crush was something he would totally approve of, and I didn't want to deal with the fawning support. A well-meaning guy, but he would only take something wondrous and make it icky. Even the most flexible yogi in the world would have to give it up for Val upon seeing how far backward he would bend to make sure I knew how supportive he was. And if he found out my new bestie was Costa Rican by heritage, god, he'd be so cool with it I'd have to peel him off the ceiling.

It could've been worse, though. I could've been coming home to someone like Bianca's husband. Gregg by name, marketing director by trade, insecure by nature. He would somehow know if you didn't speak his name with all three G's intact, and his latest, greatest fear was that I was some lesbian meteor crashing into their lives to convert his wife out from under him.

Sadly, reason alone cannot dissuade such low-testosterone fears. Never mind I had a guy of my own. Or that the previous guy I was knocking nasty boots with was named Attila, for god's sake, who spiked the testosterone meters, something I liked about him, and maybe I would've still been with him if his misanthropy hadn't gotten so exhausting to deal with. The man seriously hates people. He likes pussy but hates people. Sorry, hun, you don't get to have it both ways, because pussy is people too.

Bianca and Gregg, though? The minute I met him, I gave them another five years, tops. Family was obviously a huge deal to her, and the locus of hers was an adorable four-year-old center of gravity named Maggie, who preferred answering to Magpie. But eventually Bianca was going to admit to herself what I thought she already suspected: that a family doesn't have to be one and done. It can be remade out of original parts and new parts. Ditch the glaring, grouchy, gadfly Gregg and all three of his G's. Find herself a guy like Tanner—they're out

there—who combines the best of our former sub-par specimens, at least makes an effort to minimize his own bullshit, and is absolutely there, judgment-free, when you need him.

In spite of Gregg's misgivings, Bianca and I fell hard into our habit of yoga meet-ups, and there was always chai, and sometimes I went with her and Magpie to the park playground and watched the yard-apes in their natural habitat. Fun.

I got to study the easy way Bianca had with her daughter, how she steered Magpie with a light hand on the tiller, and how she kissed boo-boos to make them better without making a big freakout fuss, so this skinny little dark-eyed daughter of hers could grow up confident and bold. Seeing all this was a privilege, like getting to peer beneath the soil and see how a seed opened up and unfurled its potential toward the sun.

This is how it can be, it's not a myth, I would think. *This is how at least one piece of everyday life can be.*

But it scared me, too. Because I knew how much everything could change in a single afternoon. I'd be sitting on the park bench beside Bianca, scoping out the distance for any nondescript, non-dad guys who seemed to be watching too long, for no good reason. My scars ached like antennae. But I hated the paranoia, because men, too, should be able to watch children play, to appreciate the simple exuberant joy in it, without my assuming that one of them was scheming to drag a straggler to his lair. It was only a matter of time until one day, one of them, innocent or not, was going to do the wrong thing and all I would see was Wade Shavers reborn, and I'd snap and cause a scene, and . . . and Bianca, remember how you called me a Valkyrie the day we met? Now watch this.

So confusing. Some days all I wanted was to be rid of the fear and paranoia. I loved this woman and wanted to crawl up inside her smooshy thighs, then turn around and be reborn and have her hold me and rock me back-and-forth for a week. I wanted to be a blank slate again, an immaculate void that she could refill with everything she knew, passed down through generations of Costa Rican mothers with wide feet and wise eyes.

And other days? Those days I wanted to stop fucking around, stop running from it and start living up to my potential to be so much worse. Something

obviously wanted that for me. It went to such an effort to get through, and I'd listened to the message so many times it was lodged in permanent memory.

They are yours to kill.

They are yours to kill for us.

They are yours to kill for yourself.

They are yours to kill for the sake of your world.

I would see men in the park, on the edge of what I considered acceptable leering, and at first I would think this was what the message was all about. If anyone had ever forfeited their right to live, it was the Wade Shavers of the world, and now, finally, the universe was taking action to correct these mistakes. The restless souls of murdered children had banded together and found a way to get through to me. They wanted me to be their avenger. I owed them for still being here. They wanted me to be the guardian that we should've had, making pre-emptive strikes on behalf of the living.

You will know them when you sense them.

You will know them when you see them.

You will know them when you feel them.

It had to be me. Who else, who better? I'd been branded forever by the touch of murderous deviants who had it in them to offer torture and call it salvation. I was uniquely qualified to be the lesser of two evils.

You will know it is what you were made for when you do.

You will know why when it happens.

Their blood will ensure your eternity.

But then again, I would think that absolute certainty should've been more of a factor in such a mission. There should've been no room for doubts, and I was filled with them. Especially after the day I stared past Magpie at a skulking guy whose look I 100% DID NOT LIKE, total creeper material, all the sirens going off in my head. If I'd had the foresight to carry one of the axes mounted on Attila's wall, I could've run over and buried it in his skull with the confidence that no jury in the world would convict me. *It's okay, you guys! I know that look! I know where it leads, I've been to the toolshed!*

Then he let three kids who called him Daddy sneak up and tackle him, and

he was totally different. Just a regular Goofy Dad out doing Goofy Dad things.

I always had a hard enough time feeling shitty for days when I thought I'd hurt someone's feelings. Get this wrong, and there would be no coming back from it. *Sorry, kids. Sorry I murdered your dad. He reminded me of someone. Not his fault. But you're young, you're resilient, you'll get over it someday.*

No, that would've ended me.

The only thing I could say I felt that level of certainty about . . .

Was Bianca.

I knew her when I sensed her. I knew her even more when I saw her. I knew her more than ever when I touched her, my hand over hers on a teahouse tabletop. I knew I'd found somebody I hadn't even realized I was looking for.

Who could have a problem with that?

Who could want a woman like that dead, or expect me to be the one to do it?

It wasn't that they'd never lost any rescues before. Just never like this.

Tanner had never encountered anyone who had decided not to live. Jumpers went into the wild, too, sometimes, but jumpers who wanted an audience stuck to cities, where the tall buildings and the people were.

But while it was obvious how the situation had ended, Tanner couldn't feel at all certain it had begun that way. Not after what he'd already seen, heard, felt, this week.

At some point in those forty-four hours, everything had gotten twisted around for Josh Kozak. Tanner had known a dozen Joshes. Two dozen. They grew up with Spider-Man as their idol and it never left them. They climbed because nothing else made them feel more alive, and it never crossed their minds to not go home again and start thinking about the next time.

Josh hadn't gone out to that canyon to die. He'd been . . .

Used? That was how it felt. Found, appropriated, and used. Val, too. And once they'd been used up, they had been discarded.

One of the team suggested going for drinks later in the day, but this was a knee-jerk reaction, the sort of thing you might feel obligated to do after you'd watched a young man plummet 260 feet onto his head. It was how first responders were supposed to wash away the sight of brains dashed over eight or nine square yards of rock.

But it wasn't their style, really, neither Tanner's nor any of the rest of them. He didn't often drink, and when he did, it was because there was something to celebrate, and they were a long way from that here.

Grief? Anger? Confusion? You couldn't drink those away. They would still be waiting for you when you sobered up, stronger than before because now you were weaker. No, there was a better way. You dealt with what had happened in front of you by going back out and *happening to* something else.

You got in your truck with your best friend, the guy who'd watched this happen alongside you while dangling 260 feet in the air. The same guy who had spent all day beating himself up because if he'd released his climbing brake one second sooner, he might have grabbed the jumper for real, instead of snagging a breakaway piece on the way down. He could've ended up with a save, instead of a scrap of shirt in his fist.

Shawn had a need now, too. Nobody was supposed to take the losses personally, but Tanner had never known anyone who could draw that line. Detachment was for people who never left their desks. You didn't get to feel good about the wins without taking the failures to heart. The weird ones most of all.

Then, with the two of you in your truck, what you did next was drive to an address in east Denver that you'd copied from one of your sister's phones, her home before last. No plan, it was just the next dot on a haphazard scattering of dots that you trusted would all connect eventually.

You circled the block a couple of times, street and alley alike, looking for your sister's car. With no sign of it, you parked along a grimy street in a neighborhood that looked as if it was still waiting to learn there was supposed to be an economic recovery going on. Lots of brick buildings and dingy storefronts caged in black wrought iron. The plumbing supply place looked to still be in

business. Delmonico's Deli and Flowers by Phoebe weren't so lucky.

Then what you did was settle in and start waiting out the end of the workday and the last hours of the sun, as it dipped toward the mountains in the west.

You took that grief and anger and confusion, and waited to happen to the kind of asshole who would call himself Attila.

Sometimes I forgot to wonder how Bianca must have seen me after taking the time to look. I always took it for granted that people met me, then after a few minutes had it all figured out: "Oh, Daphne Gustafson, right. She's the one whose picture you find on Wikipedia under 'Hot Mess.'"

With Bianca, I should've known better. Valkyrie . . . nobody ever said that to me.

Still, it never occurred to me that she might be the one of us looking at the other and seeing someone who'd figured some things out and looked ahead with clarity and self-assuredness and daring.

The turnaround came in the park one cool, damp day in late May. This time we'd brought our chai with us, really thinking ahead, lunch hour for me and day off for her. Not even looking at her, not taking my eyes off the playground, I said some silly thing about Magpie's apparent epigenetic inheritance of spider monkey genes. Except it didn't quite land in Bianca's ear. She sat awhile, stewing in that kind of pause where you realize you're waiting for the thud of some heavy thing about to drop.

"Can I tell you something and you won't think I'm bad?"

I told her I'd do my best, something light like that, because even on her worst day, how bad could Bianca be?

"A lot of the time, I don't think she's really mine."

Magpie, she meant. Already I knew I was out of my depth, because I had little experience with young mothers. It's bad enough we belong to a species that, unlike dogs and cats and elephants, isn't born already knowing all about

motherhood, so we have to keep figuring it out along the way.

Attila in my head: Is this the biology of a species that wants to continue?

A brain cell sparked and sent up the phrase *postpartum depression*. But Bianca had never seemed depressed. To me, she was a creature of joy and wistful wonder and not infrequent sensual grace. My brain tried again and fumbled together the words *postpartum dissociation*. I had no idea if that was even a thing, but it sounded good.

"Then whose would she be?" Because I lacked any concept of what Central American Catholic guilt might look like, I had to ask: "She *is* Gregg's, right?"

Which made Bianca laugh, not so much at the question, but the tiptoeing-through-the-minefield way I asked it.

"Yes, she's Gregg's. And I'm not saying I didn't give birth to her. She's just . . ."

I could tell, Bianca had had no one else to tell this to. Ever. She'd had to keep it inside for four years, and maybe would've forever, if the right set of ears hadn't shown up.

"I love her." She threw this in hurriedly, defensively. "I'd do anything for her. But in a way that's not any different than you. Aunt Daphne. I don't . . ."

She was really wrestling with this, how to even say it. Bianca had a roundish face, and skin that repelled the mere thought of zits even on days of premenstrual hell, and could look very young at times, and now she looked like a college girl trying to figure out her whole life.

"I don't relate to her as being the same. It's like a folktale where an animal in the forest raises a baby left out to die. There's love in my heart for her. But we're not the same things. I know what I'm supposed to feel, and I don't, so I feel like a fraud."

Now we were on turf I could share with some authority. "Not to minimize your struggles . . . ? But we all feel like frauds. All we've got for that is to double down and pretend we don't. Which I guess compounds the problem."

"You don't understand. I felt that way before I was ever pregnant. I always have. I thought a baby might fix me, like, shock me into being normal. But that's only made it more obvious."

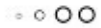
Bianca turned to me, face to face, soul to mutant soul.

“See, I don’t relate to you like we’re the same things, either. The difference is, I can tell you that and know you might understand and won’t judge me for it. But I can’t tell her. Not now, and not when she’s old enough to understand. The cruelty of even trying would be more than I could bear.”

That’s the thing about suffering in silence. It can go on for ages, right under our noses, and when it’s out, we wonder how we could’ve missed it. I held her, brushed back some hair so I could get at a tear.

“I wish I could take this from you. I wish I could take it on myself.” Because I’d taken the hits before, you know. “I wish there was something more I could do for you than listen. Because just listening seems so lame.”

“There is.” She pulled away to look me in the eye. “There was a little boy you said I made you think of. That his parents didn’t know what to make of him, because he wasn’t of this world. You made it sound like he died. I think you said his name was Brodie. You could tell me about him. Tell me about Brodie.”



Tanner focused his pair of binoculars across the street and two doors down, toward Phoebe’s dead flower shop. He zeroed in on the numbers bolted beside a metal mesh door recessed a couple of feet into the brick.

“That one,” he said. “The door that looks like it might lead up to the second floor. That should be his.”

“Is his name really Attila?”

“I hope so.”

Shawn gave a studious nod. “I get that. At least you know what you’re dealing with, then.”

Tanner set the binoculars on the dash. “How’s that again?”

“Names can be destinies. If he’s spent his entire life with that name, it’s given him something to live up to.” This was good, classic Shawn, laying bare the world and its inhabitants in his slow, deceptively sleepy way. “It’s been a

weight he's had to carry his whole life, and he probably learned how a long time ago. Attila . . . this is a name that comes with expectations. The path of least resistance would've been conforming to them."

Lovely. A would-be warlord who made his stronghold above the shell of a defunct florist.

"But if it was a name he picked a few years ago because he thought it made him sound like a badass, well, then he's a poser, and you don't know *what* you're dealing with, exactly."

"All that before you've laid eyes on the man."

"It's entirely possible I'm full of shit, too."

He usually wasn't, though. Shawn was a long-limbed guy with the half-mast eyes, dragged-out voice, and affability of someone who'd been waking and baking since high school. Except it came naturally to him. The actual Shawn could bang out a hundred pull-ups from a dead hang in five or six sets, and give you the most minute details of years-ago conversations you'd long forgotten.

He was closer to Daphne's age than Tanner's. Could've been a brother, but fate was never this considerate. Brother-in-law, now that would've been a delight, a way of rectifying one cosmic oversight, but fate sneered at this, too. Daphne would've had no use for him, at least after the first night. Eight-pack abs on a basketball player's frame . . . she would've liked that. But he would never hurt her, and that would be the deal-breaker.

"Our, uh . . . lost boy earlier today," Shawn said. "Did he have any way of knowing your sister?"

"Wish I knew. That would make things simpler in my head. But it didn't sound like it. More like he only knew *of* her."

"Those things he was saying . . . he wasn't talking complete nonsense, was he? It was registering with you. I could see that on your face."

Tanner nodded. "Part of it was on the mark."

"How would you explain that?"

"I don't."

"His explanation was that he heard about her from people who walk the webs. His words, not mine. The ones who come from the gaps, he said. The

Ginnunga Gaps. Not that I know what that's supposed to mean, but it looked like you did."

"He was off a little, but he was close. I got what he was trying to say. *Ginnungagap.* It's something you're marginally more likely to recognize if you grow up with a name like Gustafson. It's Norse mythology. It was the abyss of nothingness that everything came out of, and where it's all destined to fall back into, once the universe has run its course."

"And he just popped out with that after forty-four hours on a ledge."

"He could've known already. It's not like a trade secret or anything."

"Yeah, but it's specific. The basic concept, you find that in a lot of mythologies. Like Genesis 1. 'In the beginning' . . . ? Remember? 'The earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.' Same thing, doesn't it sound like? Ginnungagap, that's just the version your people came up with."

"My people?"

"The Viking diaspora." When Tanner objected, Shawn held up a shushing finger. "Don't fight it. You're lucky. I don't have a people. Just undifferentiated Protestants. It's more like a lobbying firm for mayonnaise." He stared down at his hands, roiling tightly around an invisible core. "It's all different ways of saying the same thing, what the old philosophers must have known on an intuitive level." Shawn mouthed a rumbling explosion and pulled his hands apart. "The Big Bang, what else could it be? And if your people saw it collapsing back together again, then they had a concept of the Big Crunch, too." He smacked his hands together with a clap. "That's actually impressive for a bunch of aggressive farmers."

Then Shawn spent some time speculating on who would win in a fight between the Vikings and the Huns, unable to see any outcome other than mutually assured destruction. Which may have been his stealth-mode way of warning Tanner not to pick a fight with this guy if they saw him. Maybe he needed the checks-and-balances after all, because when Attila showed up, Tanner hated the man on sight.

Attila stepped out of a Dodge Charger that had pulled into a narrow parking

lot between his building and the next. Binoculars up. Tanner recognized him from a few blurry pictures on one of Daphne's phones. He stood a bit taller than Shawn, but much wider at the shoulders, bulkier overall. His dark hair hung long and loose, and behind his mirrored shades he moved with the stride of a man who took it for granted that everyone else would get out of his way. He keyed past his door and was gone.

"Seen all you need to?" Shawn asked. "Or were you planning on paying him a gentlemanly social call?"

"We've come all this way," Tanner said. "Let's go say hi."

Tell me about him, she'd said. Begged. *Tell me about Brodie.*

So. We were really, finally going there.

Because to do that for her, I first had to come clean myself. You've been sitting on a secret about yourself, Bianca? Funny thing, me too. There was this toolshed, see . . .

And you feel like a fraud? Wow, me too! Maybe it's like the old saying about greatness, that some of us are born fraudulent and others have our fraudulence thrust upon us. I've never been able to escape the sense that I'm not who I was supposed to be. I can outrun it for a while, but it always catches up eventually.

I wasn't supposed to be this, Bianca.

And I'm sorry I've kept so much from you until now, but maybe you of all people will understand why. Because I met you and the click was so profound that ever since then it made me feel like I could be normal, and I wanted to hang onto that for as long as I could, that here was somebody who could love me for whatever good things she thought she saw, instead of feeling sorry for me or sniffing me out because I was damaged goods.

That's who you're dealing with here. That's who you let into your life.

What kind of fraud am I? The kind who made it sound like she actually knew this strange, dreamy little boy named Brodie Baxter, instead of learning about

him post-mortem, ten years later, as part as a research project by a teenage girl trying to reorder the ghosts in her head.

So yeah, Bianca and I got into it, all right. We got all kinds of real.

I had to laugh, though. Two teary-eyed chicks sitting on a bench overlooking a park playground, talking about kidnap and torture and murder and feeling like mother and child are different species . . . it had to sound like we were the ones the kids needed protection from.

As for Brodie, I told her everything his mother had shared with me, his quirks and the peculiar things he insisted were true: that haircuts gave him brain-fog, and the sky should be orange, and the night should have two moons, and of his deep aversion to shoes, and how he would stand for long stretches of time as if rooted to the ground, entranced and blissful except for the nagging disappointment that his toes never grew into the soil.

I told her of Wade Shavers' testimony on the stand: that during his turn in the toolshed, Brodie had started out cool with what was about to happen, going so far as to direct Shavers where to cut as he spoke of being harvested through something he'd called "the ventral stalk." Which sounded like the self-serving justifications of the vilest human being, except that even Brodie's mother could believe them.

"That's about it," I told Bianca. "I don't know anything more."

We sat on our bench in a bubble of silence the other moms and babysitters and yelping children couldn't pierce. When Bianca checked her watch, the move was jarringly mundane. Elusive secrets of the universe were dangling within our grasp, and we were still slaves to sixty-minute blocks, including drive time.

"Did any of that help? Sound familiar? Anything?"

She looked beatific then, a saint touched by the finger of God. All it had taken was listening. All it had taken was sharing the saddest things I ever knew.

"If I dropped Magpie off at her grandmother's, could you call in sick for the rest of the day?" Bianca said. "There's something I'd really like to show you."

Next to the flower shop, they found an intercom panel inside the shallow brick doorway. Tanner leaned on the button until he got an irritated response crackling back from someone who didn't sound accustomed to company. When he asked about Daphne:

"She's not here. She hasn't been here for eight months. But you probably know that already." Attila had a low voice that verged on *basso profundo* and an east coast accent, somewhere around New York. Brooklyn, maybe. "Is that you, big brother?"

"Her brother Tanner, yeah. Can we talk?"

"Isn't that what we're doing?"

"Face to face, I mean."

"Why would I want that? I can hear you fine this way."

"Because it's either now or later." Shawn stepped up to jab the intercom button for himself. "You think your little iron door and stairway mean something? Bro, this morning we were hanging 260 feet off the ground by a rope and it was just another day. You think a second floor window means shit to either one of us? And you've got to sleep sometime."

"Who was that?"

"Someone I work with. He usually has better manners."

"No, I think I like him. He's more direct than you. I hear *you*, and I know we're one or two more exchanges away from weasel words. Who's got time for that?"

The door buzzed and the lock disengaged and Tanner pushed it open. Inside, it was dim as a cave, the stairway dingy, the steps solid underfoot but creaking with age. And there were a lot of them.

At the top, the space was cavernous, a single room that had been subdivided by functions. Attila stood wide-stanced in the center, arms crossed over his chest, looking rooted to the floor on a Persian rug ringed by a motley of mismatched chairs and a sofa. A few more steps in any direction and he could go to bed, go to the fridge, or go for the weapons on the wall—keeping his options open. Attila's shades were off now, and he inspected them with an expression somewhere between a scowl and amusement.

Shawn was first to break the ice. “I made a bet with myself on the way up the stairs. ‘What’s he going to have on his wall? A couple of swords?’ Then I thought, ‘No . . . no, he’s probably an axe man.’”

Shawn tipped his head at them, a couple of lethal looking battle-axes crossed at the shafts. A matched pair, their heads were thin at the shaft, flaring into a crescent blade on one side and tapering to a long, wicked back-spike on the other.

“Are those sharp, or are they just for show?”

“And you were doing so well up to now.”

“Daphne,” said Tanner. “Do I have to ask? You already seem to know the question.”

“She’s a runner, that one. But what makes you think she’d run back here? She doesn’t run *back*. It’s not in her nature. She’s forward all the way.” He shook his head, playing perplexed. “I thought you would’ve known her better than that.”

“Somebody suggested she might’ve come here. I’m just being . . .”

“Thorough,” Attila finished. “Sure you are. That’s *your* nature. Guilt is a hell of a drug, isn’t it?”

Prick.

“Haven’t you gotten sick of her shit yet?” He almost sounded amiable. “Three sure things in life, and you’re one of them. Death, taxes, and big brother Tanner comes trotting along after Daphne whenever she goes AWOL. I wonder which one of you has trained the other better?”

“And what do you think running forward might look like for her right about now?” Good for Shawn, seeing the opening and the need to step in. “Any ideas?”

“She was only here four months. How much talking do you think we actually did? She’s . . . wherever she needs to be.”

The way he said this had a needle of gloating in it. As if he knew something a brother wouldn’t, and wanted to make sure they understood this. That women could have secrets their brothers would always be the last to know.

Tanner tried picturing Daphne here and couldn’t make her fit. Where was her

room, the refuge she'd always insisted on marking off as her own? Inside, this place was weighed down by a feeling of age that exceeded what the building looked like from outside, as if time flowed differently up here. Somebody had taken a hollow a thousand years in the making and built a 1920s brick shell around it. Scattered a few anachronisms around, like the gas stove and the stereo with speaker towers as big as battering rams, to throw you off the scent.

And Attila looked perfectly anchored within it.

Tanner had no desire to know what she'd seen in him. Attila Csonka wouldn't be someone that a woman went to, looking for anything long-term. He would be the next stop after she got sick of playing it safe. He would be the one she came to when she'd gone too long without regrets.

"Then where is it she needs to be?"

For a man with such big hands, Attila looked as if he had the dexterity to pull the wings off flies, the legs off spiders.

"Let me do some quick math," he said. "I caught a little news item while I was at work today. How a rescue operation for a missing hiker went bad. Now, I know what you do. I know you're not window washers. So if you were hanging 260 feet in the air this morning and it was just another day, I'm putting you at the scene. That was you, wasn't it? That was you trying to rescue this guy when he fell. Or jumped."

Tanner listened, his insides starting to curdle. This felt so goddamn close to going wrong, and he had no idea whose fault it would be if it did.

"Not a good day, no," Shawn said. "What of it?"

"I'm curious, is all. Most people, they get into a high place and not much in the way, there's this little voice telling them to jump. *Go on, take that extra step.* They hardly ever do, but the voice is there. The two of you, now, you're in a unique position. You're responsible for the ones who get stuck there. I really am curious. You ever get around one of them, and before you get them strapped in or whatever it is you do . . . you hear that little voice telling you to *push* them? 'This fool is too stupid to live, I should just—'"

Attila mimed giving someone a slow shove, then watching as they fell.

"Or cut their rope. You get them so far and start having second thoughts."

His movement turned more violent, as he slashed a make-believe knife.

"Or cutting your own rope. You ever want to do that? It's the same as taking that extra step, but you've got a little extra time to contemplate the act. You get to watch the fibers on the rope come apart. You get to wonder when it won't hold you anymore. That's got to make time slow down."

Tanner didn't know how to respond. He glanced at Shawn, who didn't look any closer to knowing, either. What, they had to stand here and listen to this? Maybe they did. Turning around and heading for the exit would seem so . . . beaten.

"Your silence says no, but your eyes are telling me yes. It's okay. We all have those impulses to erase the mistakes." Attila looked at them back and forth, then settled on Tanner. "So why don't you? You, of all people. You've got some good reasons to go through with it. I know what you've got waiting for you at home."

No, Tanner thought. *Don't go there. You can't go there. Nobody would go there.*

"Did they ever come up with a diagnosis for the little guy? Would it even matter if they did? That doesn't fix anything. Doesn't let anybody off the hook. You're still thinking, 'Goddamn, somebody really fucked up this kid's DNA, I just hope it wasn't me.'"

He was really hearing this. He was watching himself hear this.

"And maybe it wasn't. You, your wife, maybe it wasn't either one of you. It just happened. I heard once that if the wrong burst of gamma rays gets through the atmosphere, hits the wrong chromosome in the wrong spot at the wrong time, that's it. Nature's plan is gone. There's a new blueprint. A few particles that spent the last few billion years shooting across the galaxy came in like a sniper's bullet and changed everything."

Tanner was floating two steps behind this mannequin wearing the clothes he'd picked out, astonished at how it seemed unable to react.

"Aren't you ever tempted to do anything about that? You can't go back and throw yourself in front of the bullet. But don't you ever ask yourself what the point is? If you got a kid who may never be able to wipe his own ass, wouldn't it be better if he never happened? You can't tell me you've never been tempted to

lean into the crib with a pillow and erase that little mistake." "Jesus fucking Christ," Shawn said. "That's enough. Seriously. We get it, you're the worst person in the world. After a point you're just . . . okay, gilding the lily doesn't seem right with you, but that's all I've got."

The shameful part was, Attila wasn't wrong. Not about Reese. He'd listened to so many people try to fob it off as God's plan, then walk away as though they'd done their duty, that he was ready to send the next one who said it to meet this God of theirs. This cruel genetic engineer who had such a need to dole out children whose eyes only ever seemed to focus on some unfathomable vastness inside their own heads.

He'd never stood over the crib with a pillow. But he'd sat in the next room, wondering if he could, and how it would feel, damning or liberating. He'd debated which would be the greater show of love and mercy: letting Reese grow up the way he was, or releasing him back to where he came from.

Late night thoughts, stress thoughts, wits-end thoughts—that's all they were, and never lasted long. But they still left him wondering what kind of selfish monster thought that way at all.

Now he knew. Attila could think that way, and recognize it in another. Because he seemed to live in that zone all the time.

Tanner tamped down the furies, so he could speak. "How long was it you knew Daphne again?"

"Come on, big brother, don't lose the plot now. We covered this part already. Four months. Short . . ." Attila flashed a grin, with a flick of his tongue to lick his lips. "But sweet."

"Four months is how long she knew you. What I'm getting at is how long *you've* known *of* her. You see the difference?"

For the first time, Attila moved, edging a step toward them, toward the chair that sat between them like a boundary line. "I see the difference. Just not the relevance."

"Did you spend a year or more calling her, before you ever showed up in her life? Leaving the same message over and over?"

Until now, Attila looked as if he were in control. And he had been. He'd

looked as if nothing either of them could say or do would surprise him. Except for this. He hadn't expected this. Neither had Shawn, giving him the sideways eye, wondering what else he'd been holding back.

"So you've heard those." Attila's voice, like a rumble of thunder, was level and even now, no more taunts in it. "What did you make of them?"

"Hundreds of calls? Maybe thousands? A thing like that comes off like some sort of obsession by someone who's playing a really long, sick game."

Across the space between them, Attila glared, but with a remoteness to him now. It was the distance of someone no longer interested in poking to see what reactions he might get. No more sport. A wolf might look this way at something it could never regard as its equal.

When Attila charged, it still came as a surprise. He should've seen it coming, but it hadn't even seemed like a possibility. Why attack at all? Just let them leave, everyone going their separate ways, that's all they had to do. Plus it was one against two, and he and Shawn were fit guys. They could've held their own in a bar fight.

But this was no bar fight.

It was an axe fight, and they'd showed up unarmed.

So many mistakes.

See a couple of battle-axes on the far wall and you think, okay, I don't like it, this big guy being an even bigger prick, keeping them off-balance while he decided what to do. But at least everybody knows where the axes are, and he's a long way from them. He wouldn't. He just wouldn't.

No. He didn't have to.

See a couple of axes on the far wall, you think that's all there is. You miss the little details, the empty brackets where another pair had been mounted. What had he done, taken them down before buzzing the door open? Stash them in that big, ratty-looking plush chair he was standing near, waiting for this moment? That would work. They were smaller, their heads more compact, easy to hide from someone who only saw the back of the chair.

So Attila charged, snatching the axes on the way, one in each hand, closing the distance while Tanner and Shawn were still figuring out what was happening.

Reflex was all that got them moving. Everything was about milliseconds now. Attila was coming for him first, and Tanner reeled back toward the stairs. Attila's reach was long, though, arms and legs alike. He stamped a kick into Tanner's middle, and it was like being hit by a tree. Tanner folded instantly while juddering back into a wall, the wind knocked out of him as he strained to drag in another breath. Every airless second felt like ten.

Shawn could have run, gotten a head start down the stairs, but didn't. He went straight at Attila, low, a wrestler's move, driving a shoulder at Attila's waist, scooping for the backs of his knees to take him to the floor, diminish his ability to swing those axes. Attila spiked the end of one of the handles down into Shawn's back, then spun out of it before Shawn's grip was secure. A couple staggering steps later, he was balanced again, putting the momentum into his arm as he swung and caught Shawn on the way up.

Tanner heard the thick wet crack as the axe took him high, just above Shawn's chest, a surreal moment—this wasn't supposed to happen. Tanner was supposed to be able to breathe, that wasn't too much to ask for, and he couldn't imagine what would've made such a sound, then he had it—that's where the collarbone goes. He'd never heard one sheared in two.

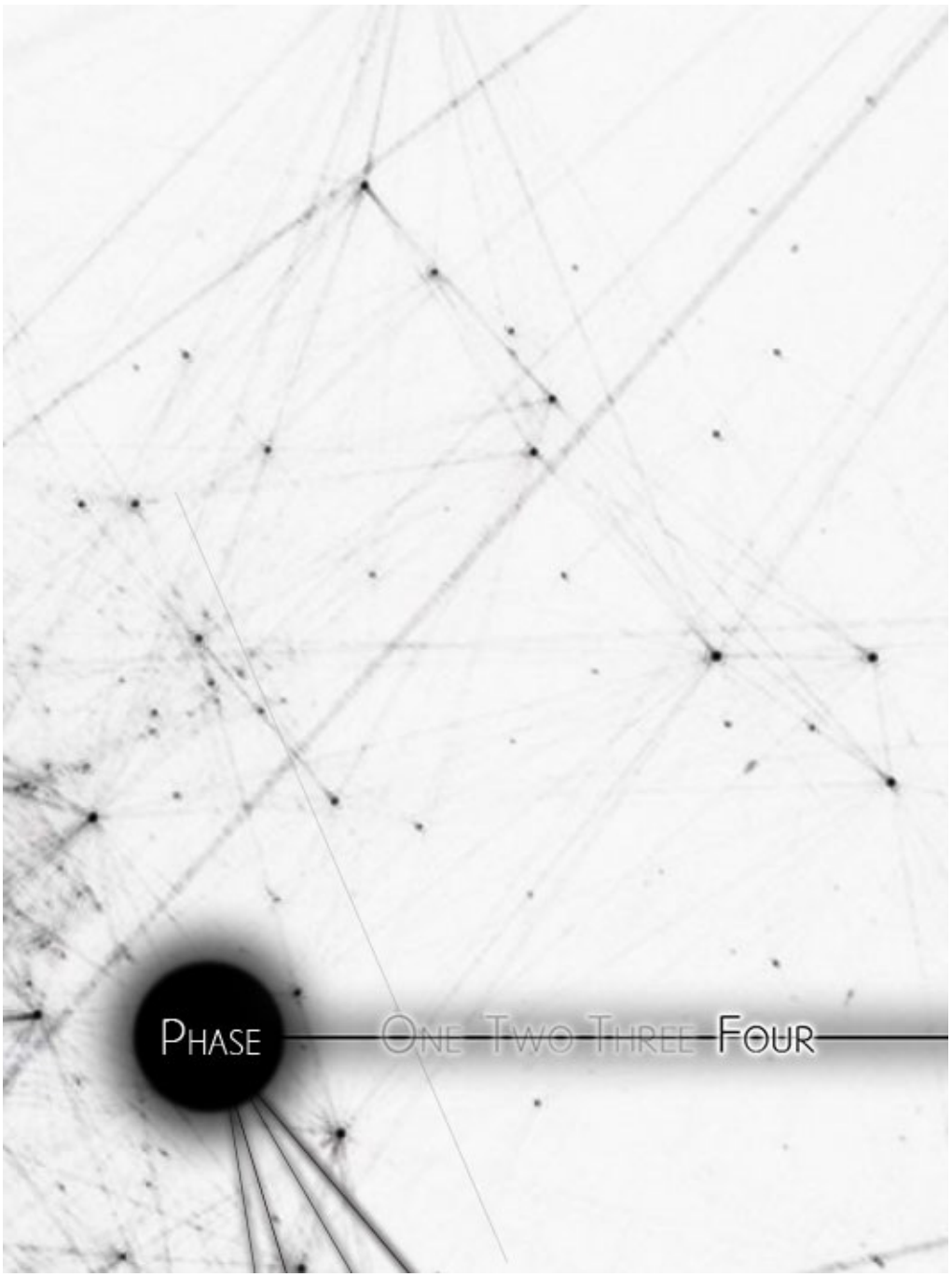
Tanner had never seen anyone hold his prey in place with an axe, either, as if it had become a handle for their body. He'd never heard Shawn sound like he was in trouble. Or the duller thud of someone hit for a second time as another axe came in from the other side and chopped into the meat of a shoulder. He'd never heard the sound of axes being wrenched out of the wounds they'd made, ripped from bone and muscle and lung. He'd never heard himself wheeze when wheezing was all he could do.

But something kicked in, overriding the primal urge to cower, and got him moving even though his vision was still sparkling with stars as he lurched forward. One arm, that was all he needed to tie up, just one of Attila's arms. They could turn this around. Shawn would rally. They both had seen the damage a human body could take out and still hang on, because survival was all. They had things to live for.

Attila noticed him coming and wasn't having any of it. He twisted the left

axe free of Shawn’s chest, tossed it with a flip and caught it under the head, then gave it a flick, the stinging quickness of it contemptuous, *oh no you don’t, big brother*. The hardwood handle caught him along the jaw, and the butt end behind his ear. Tanner was on the floor before he knew his legs had buckled, and he could see nothing now, only the red haze and the blurry starfield that lived within the nothing.

But his ears fared better, sounds making their way through the numbing throb that enveloped his skull, and if he thought he’d heard bad things before, now he could only lie there and listen to worse, much worse.


PHASE
ONE TWO THREE FOUR

The souls of those who quit the body violently are most pure.
—The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster

Exhausted four-year-old, dropped off into the welcoming arms of her grandmother? Check.

Abrupt onset of food poisoning, as far as my office was concerned? Check.

Quick stop by home, with Val out on a client meeting, so I could change clothes and trade my pumps for Merrell Moab Ventilators, because my friend threatened there would be hiking? Check.

Then we hit the road, two girls who just wanna have fun. Right as soon as we sort out everything about ourselves that's still so fucked up.

With the foothills looming ahead of us and the mountains beyond, we made it out of the flatlands of Denver and up through Boulder, until we got funneled into a secondary route winding a steady climb toward Estes Park. Which, in autumn, often got taken over by wandering alpine herds. When I warned Bianca it would be a day-ruiner to have a head-on collision with a horny elk, she told me we wouldn't be going that far.

"Where are we going, then? Or is it a secret until we get there?"

"Do you know the Chapel on the Rock?"

Embarrassed, I had to tell her no. I've only lived in the area all my life, right?

"That's just what they call it. You'll see why. It's really named for Saint Catherine of Siena."

"I don't know her, either," I said. "So you're taking me to church. This has

all been a long con, hasn't it?"

Which almost got her to laugh. She told me not to worry, we didn't have to go inside. The chapel was only where we would be starting out. Hiking, remember? Where we were really going was beyond it, a spot where she and Gregg went for a picnic once, soon after she found out she was pregnant.

For now, I had to know: Why her interest in Brodie Baxter?

"I don't remember it much myself," she said, "but my mother used to tell me how I was afraid of swimming pools, but loved ponds. And streams. Creeks. Lakes. The ocean, too, the one time they took me there, until I got a taste of it and said the salt hurt, that water shouldn't have salt. That it was poison."

Some kids hate shoes. Others hate salt and chlorine. So those were her childhood aversions. But, on pressing, I learned that drinking tap water and baths were never a problem. So maybe what she was averse to was the *concentration* of chlorine. Or the pool walls. Like, to her, the thing was some claustrophobic tank.

It was intriguing, though. If a kid is going to fear the water, it shouldn't be the clear stuff where she can see nothing's coming to get her. It should be the murky, mucky-bottomed water that could hide anything from krakens to lake-sharks. But that was Bianca's element.

"Mama said I would run for them and tear my clothes off on the way. I'd jump in and flounder around, so happy they'd have to dredge me out to get me to leave. Then I'd always cry." She glanced over to see if I was following, as though in spite of all we'd confessed, I still had the power to crush her with rejection. "Mama said I screamed like I'd discovered my *real* mother and now I was being torn from her."

A sight I found easy to envision. A pain I found effortless to feel.

"She said what bothered her was *how* I tried to swim. By holding my legs together and pressing my arms to my sides, and . . ." Bianca took one hand off the wheel to demonstrate an undulating motion. "Where it was shallow enough, I used to lie in the mud that way. She has pictures. Mama said I was never happier than when I was doing that. And that I used to ask when I was going to get my flippers."

Bianca seemed to stare out the windshield at the world coming at us at seventy miles per hour, without seeing any of it.

"'Oh, that Bianca,'" she said, with an accent I'd never heard from her. "'Such a *loco* imagination.'"

Such an easy wound for a mother to inflict, too. Ha ha, isn't that cute. Now grow up and forget these crazy ideas, or the other kids won't like you.

"That image of how things are supposed to be, it never stopped for me. Not even when I had Magpie. I was delirious when they put her in my arms and I saw her for the first time. I didn't mind the blood and goop, but . . ." Her eyebrows pulled together in a high degree of what's-wrong-with-me anguish. "Two arms, two legs. Ten fingers, ten toes. You're supposed to feel relief when you see she's perfect. Maybe I did, but I was disappointed, too, underneath. My heart just fell. All those months, feeling her growing inside me, it felt to me like she should have . . ."

When Bianca couldn't say it, I touched her arm to let her know she didn't have to. Even among friends, you couldn't cop to wanting a literal flipper baby without fearing serious blowback.

"I blamed Gregg," she whispered. "I wanted a water birth and he wouldn't let me. But I love her. Who couldn't love her?"

Flippers or not, Bianca didn't have to convince me.

Leaving the town of Lyons, she turned left at the T-intersection, taking the back route to Estes Park, a road I'd never had the patience for on the occasions I'd been up this way. The hills wrapped around us in a twisty gauntlet of evergreens and reddish crags. A few miles along, Bianca pulled off at a place so picturesque it belonged on calendars, a panorama of meadows and mountains and pines. It seemed an unlikely location for a church, at least one this impressive . . . but you couldn't build a Chapel on the Rock just anywhere.

Like a miniature cathedral, it stood on a thick outcropping of stone whose base, at one end, was abutted by a weedy pond, like half a moat. The chapel's walls were made of irregularly shaped rocks that joined together in perfection, rising straight and sure and tall, to the slopes and eaves of the roof. In another place, another time, it would resemble a fortress that would be the death of a

thousand invaders in chainmail. But the top-to-bottom strips of stained glass implied a different crusade.

I always liked the idea of churches more than what actually went on inside them . . . all that obeisance and self-flagellation and dumbing-down of principles beyond any hope of human understanding.

But I could like this one. “Are we going in?”

She shook her head. “Not now. On the way back, we can, if you need to.”

Need to? Interesting.

It was a good day for hiking. We set off from the parking lot into the pine forest that spilled down the distant slopes and fell just short of crowding the chapel. As the sound of the roadway we’d left behind faded, Bianca led me deeper, into the quiet of the wood where birds sang and the ground was soft with decaying needles and littered with pinecones.

The first time let my fingers trail along some rough bark, I decided not to do it again. We bring evergreens inside for December, a tradition my ancestors gave the world, and it’s a warm and homey thing to do. But out here, I remembered, they’re not welcoming trees, not like oaks and maples and shady weeping willows. They’re prickly and spiky, and leak sap like it’s a backup way to punish you if you avoid getting poked.

Bianca pointed out a cozy, sun-dappled clearing, the place where she and Gregg spread their picnic blanket five years ago. After a while, she’d developed a yearning to go for a walk, feeling not so much an urge, but a pull, to go deeper still.

She’d welcomed it. Back at the chapel, she’d given thanks for the blessing of her pregnancy, and asked whoever might be listening, God or saint, to give her guidance, and take these strange, persistent thoughts from her head. Help her be a real mother, normal and unconflicted.

Maybe this is how it begins, she’d thought. *The intuitions of motherhood, maybe they start with a feeling like this.*

If she rebuffed it, it might abandon her forever. She’d wanted to go alone but Gregg wouldn’t hear of it, so he tagged along, humoring her mostly, but even then she was careful to keep her deeper reasons to herself.

It took them fifteen minutes of tromping deeper into the pines, toward the peaks nudging over the treeline in the distance, before Bianca realized she'd reached the spot that was doing the calling. She and I were able to shave a few minutes off that, because by now Bianca knew exactly where she was going. She'd been here many times. Alone, usually. Sometimes with her daughter. Never again with Gregg, because even then, he didn't see, didn't feel, didn't *know*.

"Maybe you won't, either," she said. "But at least I can tell you."

How honored could I be? We'd known each other less than three months and she was already taking me to see this secret spot she hadn't shared with anyone else—of course I was going to get it, going to see and feel and know.

And then she took me to another rock in the middle of a mountain range utterly infested with rocks. I was afraid I was no better than Gregg.

Granted, it was pretty, as rock formations go. And big, in context, nothing else around in the middle of this woodland except for more evergreens that made way for it. A few foolhardy pines had sent in exploratory roots and been rebuffed.

There were other, smaller stones gathered around it, heaped along its base, but the main, mighty chunk towered four times my height, a great slab that looked all of a single piece, no fissures where it had cracked or split. It looked as if it might have been part of an immense fin of stone extending down from the slopes, either uncovered by erosion, or a surviving formation left after the greater part of it had been broken up by time or glaciers or . . .

And I had no idea. Just talking out my ass. Geology, not my thing.

I felt Bianca at my back, daring to hope. *Do you see? Do you feel?* There had to be more here than sediment glued together millions of years ago. She wouldn't have pimped it this way otherwise.

I gazed up it, then down. Side to side and all around. It took time, but it . . .

It . . .

Showed itself to me, is the only way I could think to phrase it. Like one of those Magic Eye 3-D visual puzzles that at first look like a riot of repeating patterns, nothing there . . . then after you stop trying to hard, you see the image

that’s been there all along, buried in plain sight. This was like that, only infinitely stranger, because this was no planned gimmick.

Past the weathering, past the accretions of lichen and moss, I could see where, at one end of the formation, a column was imbedded in it—or would you call it a pillar? More followed: a lintel across the top, then another column and another. I could make out the swelling of their bases and their heads. They weren’t immediately apparent as columns because they were neither smooth nor fluted, like those of ancient temples or modern courthouses. Instead they undulated up and down their lengths, thickening and tapering, over and over. They appeared to flare apart at the thinner spots, like pieces of sectioned fruit, that met and interlocked in seamless junctures. These were just random enough to miss, and just regimented enough to look designed.

Here, though. In the heart of a pine forest at 8,500 feet above sea level, in the middle of a mountain range. Sure. I buy that.

“Maybe it was worked,” I said. “By hand? By tools?”

Who, though? Some eccentric settler in the late 1800s, obviously—just the thing to unwind after a day of hunting venison and building cabins and dodging bears and surviving dysentery.

Bianca gave me her best you-know-better-than-that look. Such a mom look. “I don’t think so.”

“How can you be so sure?” Because, did she really think she was qualified to make that determination?

“It told me.”

“You don’t mean out loud. Do you?”

“Why don’t you try touching it.”

Stranger things, and all. There was always that perpetual dry spot on my cheek to remind me that, at any moment, we can find ourselves shoved face-first against something that makes no sense and never will. So I stepped up and became a born-again rock-hugger.

The bigger they are, the easier it is for stones to exude a feeling of great age. They’re a shortcut for conveying deep time. My go-to standard is on the west side of Boulder, the array of mountainsides called the Flatirons. Five titanic slabs

of sandstone bedrock laid down 300 million years ago, and tilted almost vertical by the grinding, slow-motion collision of tectonic plates that created the Rockies. They're *old*. Like, time travelers from before the dinosaurs kind of old.

And this one, beneath my hands? It would've come out of the same events, the same processes, a pebble in comparison to the whole.

And yet . . . ?

And yet.

I came, I saw, I felt . . . *something*. Now what was it I was supposed to know?

Paradoxes, that's what I felt. This unlikely columnar behemoth belonged here, a staggeringly old piece of the landscape. And yet it didn't. It was one chunk of the same geological processes that had pushed up a mountain range 3,000 miles long. Yet it was more than that, an outlier, an alien with as much consciousness behind its design as the chapel where we'd left our car.

It hadn't just crossed the years by the hundreds of millions, leapfrogging over the dinosaurs and the rise of mammals and us. Its roots went vastly deeper. If the Flatirons had crossed a lake of time, this had crossed oceans.

The sensation was like falling, but only to a point. Only up to the edge of forever. Once over, it's not falling anymore. Falling needs a point of reference, things rushing by and the ground coming at you, and I was past that. Time is a function of gravity—Einstein, I think?—and with my gravity gone, so was any sense of time, as everything I ever knew went floating, everywhere and nowhere.

Except for this anomalous *thing* that anchored my hands.

There was the stone itself, sediment layered together a grain of sand at a time, the same here as everywhere else. But here, and only here, there was form. And behind the form was the idea of it. And behind the idea was . . . what, a way of thinking?

Another way of thinking?

How could I even know this?

I heard it again, this time an intrusion from inside me:

You will know them when you sense them

You will know them when you see them.

You will know them when you feel them.

No. I don't want this. I really don't.

The vertigo began again, because now there was a link, a point of reference again, going back back back back back, and maybe it pulled at me or maybe I pulled at it, but there was no way I could be stretched so thin, so far, across so much time. There was too much nothing in between. But I was a point, and it was a point, the two of us having become like entangled particles, and to act on one was to simultaneously act upon the other, no matter how far apart we were.

Then gravity was back, and with it time, billions of years, tens and tens of billions—no, wait, even the universe isn't that old.

The answer, less than a whisper, yet so obvious: Well, not *this* universe. But start stringing them together, then you've really got an interesting system going.

Never mind how could I know this. How could I *survive* this? A fragile human mind isn't supposed to grasp such things, perceive them, experience them, feel them all the way across, and still be able to function. Wherever my body was, its mouth was probably drooling, if the whole thing, scars and all, hadn't rotted away a long time ago.

The answer, again, so obvious: I was primed as a child. I'd brushed up against this dimension before and it had seeped through me ever since, while the original me, who I was supposed to be, flaked away a little at a time through that dry patch that was its own kind of scar.

Then I fell a little more, far enough to land with the ungainly thud of my butt hitting the ground.

She'd pulled me. Bianca had pulled me back.

She plopped down next to me and held me, while I tried to move and all I could manage was a pitiful wallowing motion. And, oh god . . . drool for real.

"I was afraid I was going to lose you to it," she said. "I think that could happen to anyone. Not just me."

She was cradling me like I'd wanted her to when we first met, and all I saw when I looked at her was this brown, smooshy-thighed earth mother who might help take me back to myself again.

"I told you I didn't remember much about these things from when I was a

little girl, that I just knew what they told me . . . ?" she said. "There's one day I do remember."

But there was no original self to go back to, was there? There was just what I am.

"We were at the lake and my parents lost track of me while I was under the water, on the bottom, the way I liked to be. I was down so long I didn't need to breathe anymore. As little as I was, I knew this was important. It was everything. I knew if I stayed down much longer I'd never come up again. I'd just swim out farther and be whatever it was I kept trying to remember. I wanted it. But it scared me, too. So I came back up. When I got to the beach, my mother was surprised to see me. She hadn't seen me in so long she thought I'd gone to the bathroom or the concession stand. That's how I know it wasn't my imagination. I really was down that long."

I looked up at her, and the paradoxes had followed me back. There were times Bianca looked so young, college-young, round-faced and plump-cheeked. So how was it that, right now, she could appear so immeasurably old?

She gazed at the rogue stone formation with fondness and awe. "We're the same thing, this and me. We're more like each other than you and I are. If I could, I would crawl inside it and melt with it and stay forever."

She stretched over to pat it, meat slapping on stone.

"I think I'm supposed to kill you." I really said that, the way you'll say dumb things when you're stuck half in a dream state.

Bianca didn't even seem surprised. "I was afraid of that. That *someone* would."

"I don't want to kill you."

"Then don't." Like it was supposed to be that simple. "But even if you had to, would that really be so bad?"

Tanner didn't so much come to again as wait for the circuits to unscramble. That

crack across the jaw with the axe handle hadn't knocked him out; more like it had flipped crucial switches, jiggled loose a few wires. Even after he'd recovered from the stomp-kick to his midsection and could breathe again, everything else needed time to reset. His head hummed and his vision was a haze of fuzz and he couldn't think what to do with his limbs even if he could move them properly.

For a time, there had been nothing but the sound of axes and their thudding wet impacts and the grunts and a few final moans until nothing human was left, no more Shawn in it, only the sound of meat and splintering bone.

Once his eyes no longer showed him three of everything, Tanner found that he couldn't pull his hands in front of him, wrists crushed against each other in the small of his back and cinched with something inflexible. His fingertips could wiggle enough to brush what felt like a wire hanger. He had no idea when this had happened.

From floor level, Attila looked tall enough to scrape the ceiling as he turned to stare at him, scrutinizing, something about Tanner catching his attention, maybe that he was clear-eyed again. The footsteps boomed like hammer blows as Attila crossed the distance with one of his axes.

Tanner tried to move, escaping to nowhere, feeling like a roach that had been stepped on and left to scuttle in circles. Attila reached down with his axe and hooked its head under Tanner's armpit to drag him across the floor. Jesus god, he hadn't cleaned it yet, the thing still clotted with gore. Attila deposited him against a wall, then slipped the head from beneath his arm and hunkered in front of him, bracing the axe across both knees.

To look at Attila, from his hair to his boots, you'd think some of all that blood had to be his own. Apparently not.

"That urge you're feeling to do to me whatever it is you'd like to do?" he said. "Feel it all you want. It's healthy. Just keep it under control." He tipped his head back Shawn's way. "I don't have to make as big a mess as that every time. I can take toes, if that's what it takes to keep you in line." He brushed the axe head through Tanner's hair, smearing his cheekbone with blood and worse. "Make it so you won't ever walk right again. That's ten little pieces and we've hardly

gotten started. But don’t make me and I won’t. It’s your call, big brother.”

Tanner’s gaze strayed to the sodden heap a dozen feet away. Shawn hadn’t been disarticulated, nothing like that. More that he was broken, mangled, everything askew, split with rents and parts of him pointing and poking in directions they shouldn’t. And for absolutely no reason he could think of.

Attila read him well. “I said earlier I thought maybe I liked him. I didn’t say anything about needing him.”

“So you need me, then.”

Attila had, after all, switched his grip to swat him down with the handle when it would’ve been quicker and easier with the sharp end.

“I don’t know. Do I?” His gaze was frank, his blood-spattered features coarse and heavy as he appeared to weigh the matter. “Let’s find out.”

Attila patted him on the shoulder, then pushed up to his feet. Once he was across the room he was speaking again, on his phone now, and this whole situation made less sense all the time.

I did what I felt I had to—Tanner made out that much. *Maybe a little extra on top of that. It’s more a matter of degree than outcome.*

He was accustomed to the worst of the elements—snow and sleet and winter winds, the numbing meltwaters of springtime mountain runoff—and had never in his life felt this cold.

Whoever Attila was talking with, the conversation could’ve lasted two minutes or it could’ve lasted ten. Time wasn’t clear. Tanner knew only that at some point he had Attila’s full attention again. The man returned with another wire hanger that he twisted around Tanner’s ankles, using pliers to get it snug before dragging him farther across the floor and hoisting his feet up and wrapping the wire’s length around a closet doorknob.

He disappeared then. While hearing the sound of a shower, all Tanner could manage was to rock back and forth in place. The knob was sturdy enough that tugging at it only made the wire bite deeper into his Achilles tendon.

When he came back, Attila was clean again, naked, skin beaded with water, his wet hair draped down his back and a towel tossed over his shoulder. Wide shoulders, wide chest, wide hips, and a horse cock. Jesus. He was still carrying

an axe, as clean as he was now, and wiping down the metal with an oiled rag.

It took Tanner a moment to make the leap: He was at least going to survive the evening.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “You could’ve let us walk out of here and nothing would’ve been any different. I don’t know shit about you. Shawn knew even less. We’d go our separate ways and that’s it. You didn’t have to . . .” He shook his head.

“How about we trade?” Attila said. “One for one. Give a little, get a little.”

More time talking meant less time for pain. Even if he didn’t know what he could say that Attila would find of value.

Attila settled on the floor to finish wiping the axe. Three feet away and looking as if he didn’t consider Tanner a problem at all. He was probably right.

“Daphne’s new guy. What happened at his house while you were there the other day? Between the ambulances and the germ suits and federal cars, it had to be big. You must’ve been an eyewitness. So what happened?”

“How did you even know about—” Tanner hadn’t known what to expect, but if he’d had to guess, it wouldn’t have been this. “Have you been watching her?”

“That’s not going to be your one, is it? That’s a question that answers itself, if you think for a second.” Attila appeared to take pity, if only because it gave him an opportunity to gloat. “I don’t have the budget for satellite surveillance, but you’d be amazed at what you can install in the average neighborhood tree.”

Tanner shut his eyes. He’d fill in the lesser blanks later. If there was a later.

“Val . . . he came apart. Literally.” A glance in Shawn’s direction. “Like if you’d kept doing that for hours, only in thirty seconds or so.”

He knew how it sounded, how unbelievable.

“Details. That’s where the devil is. Let’s have ’em.”

Tanner told it as succinctly as he could. The change that had come over Val, how he’d moved like someone who’d forgotten how his body was supposed to move. How he’d fumbled for the phones and stuffed one down his throat. How he’d been like someone in a fugue state for the next few minutes until he had disintegrated.

“And you saw this happen.”

“From about as close as I am to you now.”

“Lucky you.” Attila seemed oddly sincere. “Privileged witness, and you didn’t even know enough to see it that way at the time.”

“You don’t seem surprised by any of this.”

“It’s something I’ve heard of happening. I know it’s within the realm of possibilities. But then, what isn’t.”

Attila gave him a look of scorn, as if he’d been unworthy of seeing what he had. Then finished wiping down his axe, turning it this way and that, to inspect the crevices.

“You’re just going to leave me hanging on this?”

“So this is your *one* now?”

“No. It’s just exploring those details you wanted.”

Attila tossed aside his oily rag and toyed with the axe again, pondering what to do with it, then buried its blade into the floor with a thud that shuddered through boards and bones alike.

“Let’s say that gods are real. But nothing like you were ever taught, whether or not you believed any of it. The word, *gods*, it’s just a label. It gets a vague point across, that’s all. We’re talking magnitude here. Not function, not role. Magnitude.”

Tanner listened with a feeling like falling through the floor. Inside and out, he ached, a band of muscle tight from the hinge of his jaw around the back of his skull. It didn’t matter if he died tonight or tomorrow or the day after. There were people out there he loved, and he was probably never going to see them again. No prayer, no incantation, would change the fact that nothing was going to intervene on his behalf.

“But what they actually are . . . ?” Attila went on. “Anything I can say, it’s not that it would be wrong. Just that it’s not right enough. They’re . . . a mind that can travel outside a body. A soul without a conscience. An intellect that understands matter and energy on an intuitive level, that can park itself like a spider on a web of dark energy and spend the next billion years watching two spiral galaxies spin into each other, because goddamn, that’s entertainment.”

From here, helpless on his back, it didn’t matter to Tanner whether any of

this was true. All that mattered was the love he felt for the people who deserved it, and how it was going to die with him.

“Now think of all that power. Think of trying to feed even a little bit of it into a container like this.” Attila poked at his shoulder. “These meat-suits are barely good for a hundred years, if that. But if you’ve got an agenda and need something done in a hurry, and it’s your only option, and you’re aware of one that’s weak enough to shove the pilot aside, you’ll move in and take it over and work with what you’ve got to work with. It probably just won’t last very long.”

Tanner entertained the notion. Whatever had afflicted Val, it had been as if every cell in his body had blown out, let go.

“Stick your finger in a light socket, you get a little jolt. Grab a cable from the power station, you get fried to a crisp. That’s how I understand it, anyway.”

It seemed like this was the part he was supposed to laugh at, but he couldn’t find the sound within him. It even could’ve been true. None of it didn’t fit with what he’d seen and heard. So all the argument he had left was that it couldn’t be true because it simply couldn’t. That wasn’t good enough.

And so what. So fucking what.

“You think I care about any of that?” Tanner said. “It’s yours. You’re welcome to it. All that matters to me pretty much comes down to family, friends, and whoever’s having a bad day in the mountains.”

“Which brings us to why we find ourselves together like this.” Attila shifted on the floor, disturbingly comfortable in his bare skin with a corpse twenty feet away. “Here’s the thing, big brother. You’re not a give-it-up kind of guy, are you? It’s not in your nature. So, I know right away, you coming here on the hunt for Daphne, it’s just one more stop for you. You would’ve gotten right back out there and kept on looking. It’s what you do. You head out and find Daphne, whether she needs finding or not.”

Attila ran his palm up and down the handle of the axe embedded in the floor between them, as though it were a handle he could pull to change the world.

“She doesn’t need finding anymore. She’s got things to do. She doesn’t need you riding in and confusing it all for her.”

Again, Tanner heard it in the back of his mind, anchored through the

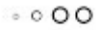
repetition of figuring out the message something had spent years bombarding her with.

They are yours to kill.

They are yours to kill for us . . .

"Then why am I still breathing?"

"Right now, I'd say leverage. We're all in a process of becoming, you know. Most people, they're becoming less all the time. But Daphne, she's becoming more. She's not quite there yet, but she can get there. She just has to make that leap." Attila tugged his axe free of the floor with a squeal of wood. "And if I've got to take you apart a piece at a time to make sure she does, then that's what we'll do."



Bianca wasn't supposed to make it so easy on me, the weird bitch. I blurt out the most threatening thing I've ever told anyone, and what does she come back with? No *Fuck you, Daphne*. No *You can walk home from here and never come near me again, Daphne*. No *What color do you like your restraining orders in, Daphne?* That's how normal people are supposed to react.

Me, all I got was a lame *Well, I'd rather you not murder me, but if it has to happen, I could live with it if it was you doing the murdering*.

In so many words.

What a bizarre place to go forward from. Dwelling on it, imagining it happening, as a mental exercise. It's the kind of shared sickness that brings BFFs together.

How would you like to be done in, my luscious friend? Would you prefer it quick and painless, or would you like your killer to make a bold, splashy statement?

Gosh, I never gave it any real thought before. There sure are a lot of options, aren't there? Shooting's always good, for a start.

We could . . . but don't you find that too easy? Detached, even? It's not very

personal. It's like using a remote control. I could kill you from across the room.

You could kill me from across the playground, too. And doing it while all the kids and the normal, boring, non-amphibian moms are watching? That's a statement.

Yeah, but still. I move one finger and you're gone. It's lazy.

What about knives, then? That opens up a range of possibilities, from surgical precision to wild, unhinged frenzy.

You'd really be okay with that? That would have to hurt.

It would, but it's so much more personal.

It would really force a commitment, wouldn't it? I'd have to see it through, start to finish, and I'm not totally sure I could. I can't promise you I wouldn't lose my nerve.

Oh, so you walk away crying and leave me lying there on the ground, and maybe I bleed out and maybe I don't? What a selfish thing to do.

But you're so aesthetically pleasing, and maybe you've got issues, but I think you're a good person. How do I carve that up?

Then what about hitting me with something? Hit me hard enough in the right spot, with the right thing, and I might not even know the rest of it was happening.

Blunt object?

Or worse.

Well . . . the previous guy in my life, Attila? He has some battle-axes. Yeah. Real, honest-to-god, no-shit, battle-axes. The beauty of going that route is that I could totally wimp out after only two or three whacks, but there's so much damage already . . .

That sounds great! You think he'd let you borrow one?

I can't imagine anything that would make him happier. I suspect he's thought about using them on somebody for a long time. Like, thought about it a lot. And you know? I wouldn't bet my life he hasn't already.

You're joking.

I wish I was.

Where does someone like you meet a guy like that? A biker bar?

At the museum, actually. The Denver Museum of Nature and Science. Last

year they had a special exhibit on medieval warfare. He works there as a curator, and he helped put that one together. Sometimes, on his days off, he liked to drift through the exhibit gallery and see how people were enjoying it.

That's kind of nice.

Not really. What he was actually doing was listening to people for the stupidest things they'd say, and fantasizing about which weapon he'd like to use on them. It helped him relax. Of course he didn't tell me that right away. He wasn't that honest up front. But by then, we had this . . .

Connection?

Yeah. Connection. But not a good one. Only you don't recognize that until you're already hooked. It's this chemistry, right off, that makes you think, "I know him, or he knows me—yeah, that's it, he sees something in me no one else does and he takes it seriously, so that means he takes me seriously." Do you know how seductive that is?

I'm afraid I do. But you make it sound like that little spark that first drew you to me.

No. Don't ever say that, Bianca. It may sound the same. But it wasn't the same feeling at all.

Then what's the difference?

The difference is in where it leads. You make me feel like I can be something better, and that it really can be up to me. Attila made me feel like I'm supposed to be something worse and I don't have any say in it at all. And, you know . . . I still can't decide which option is the more authentic.

Of course Bianca and I didn't really have those conversations. Not unless you counted all the times our eyes met—it was obvious we both felt the unspoken weight of it. That sense of not understanding why we felt like playthings in huge, cold hands.

These dialogues were just something I took with me, wherever it was quiet and thoughtful, away from Val's efforts to bring out the better angels of my nature. Which sounds like a positive influence, but he was so sunshiny annoying about it, making it obvious that all I was to him was a salvage project, the way a handy person might pick up a dinged coffee table to refinish, that he was starting

to make ritual murder seem like a path to actually consider.

There had never been any such pretenses to salvation with Attila.

With him, from the very beginning, it was like he knew me better than I knew myself. Another *namaste*-thing, turned inside-out: The sociopath in me recognizes the potential sociopath in you . . . she only needs a little coaxing. She needs to give herself permission.

Lying in bed, he would make it sound like hypotheticals. “If you thought you had to kill someone to reach the fullest expression of who you are, would you do it?”

Light, lively questions like that. How could I begin to answer? I’ve been to the toolshed, remember. I know what it feels like on the receiving end.

He would look at me like he pitied me, or would if he was capable of feeling pity, and ask if it was some illusory morality holding me back. He liked to remind me that there wasn’t any such thing as morality on a battlefield. And for sure there wasn’t any such thing as morality in an evolving world, where forms were always in a process of becoming. There was no morality in a volcano or an asteroid or an exploding star. No room for it in the relationship between wolves and deer. So why toss it in now, this gear-clogging artificial sweetener that could only get in the way of *becoming* . . . especially now, he said, when the tipping points had already been reached and evolving had crested the hump and was starting to careen back down toward degeneration again.

This was pillow talk for him. When I was open and aching and sore and soaked and at my most pliable.

Burrowed in close, there were times when Attila could murmur in my ear and the sound would be like Wade Shavers all over again. Only I’d walked right into his arms, willingly, and he no longer wanted to destroy me and leave me that way. Now he wanted me to rise from my ruins and become what was made of me.

That which does not kill me only makes me more dangerous to everyone else around me.

They could’ve been brothers, or father and son, they sounded so much alike. Wouldn’t it be better not to exist? That was Attila’s dream. His fantasy. His

endgame. It was the thing that, for him, took meaninglessness and made it meaningful. Better not to be—not just dead, but never born, your existence nullified, acknowledging the Great Mistake and having the balls to wield the eraser.

Why not just kill yourself, I would ask him. I meant it, too, a serious question, and Attila would laugh. He scorned it as a kneejerk response, one that didn't require any thought, just a watery belch from someone who believed she was being half clever by pointing out the contradiction.

More pillow talk. He's sent me high, now he has to crush me low.

Hatred is an energy, he would tell me. Wrath is an energy. Loathing and abhorrence and antipathy and ruination . . . all energies. So they should be directed somewhere, to act upon something, before they were spent through the dissipation of time. Anywhere but inward.

How do they find me? How do these men dedicated to making an art out of wrecking others' lives keep finding me? And what does it say about me that they do?

Tanner found it hard to conceive of Attila as someone who would have friends. Partners in crime seemed more likely. Fellow members of a wolf pack—Tanner could see that. Guys sitting around on Sunday afternoons to watch the Broncos? Not likely.

Within a couple hours of Attila making his phone call, three of them showed up. They all seemed on task, nobody the least bit bothered by the ruin he'd made of Shawn. A team on call, mobilizing to dispose of a murder victim, was a different level of association than Tanner was prepared to understand.

Two men and one woman, serious people with serious faces, they paid him little attention. Still wired by his ankles to the closet doorknob, he was beneath notice, maybe beneath contempt. They gathered around Shawn with all the respect of a highway crew standing over a problematic smear of roadkill.

The fellow with a shaved head and fierce black beard huffed a disgruntled sigh, irked by the hour, too late for this nonsense. “And here we have ourselves another textbook example of Attila getting medieval on someone’s ass.”

“You couldn’t have hit him a few more times?” said the second man. He was the oldest, easily in his sixties, maybe beyond, soft-jowled and grandfatherly, his hair an unruly cap of snow-white curls. “I see a spot you missed.”

Attila shrugged it off. “I got caught up in the moment. You had to be here.”

“And a pity I wasn’t. It would’ve brought back . . . memories.”

“Are they going to be a problem?” The woman was wiry and angular, athletic in a sleek black bob. She seemed impatient to get things moving along, inclined to twitch her foot when they weren’t. “Are they going to be missed?”

“Missed, sure. A problem . . . I’m betting no. They came here to intimidate. They showed up implying violence toward my person.” Attila turned from the group to glance back in his direction. “How about it, Tanner? Did you tell anybody you were coming here? You two boy scouts share your interesting plans for the evening?”

Tanner gritted his teeth. The only person would could have placed him here had left home in buckets. With Val gone, he couldn’t think of a lie he could sell on the spot.

“I suspected not. Doesn’t fit your day-job image, does it? Rolling up here the way you two did, that’s more of a black-ops sideline, isn’t it? Better to keep that quiet. Besides . . . if you talk about it, then you have to talk about *why,* and I bet you don’t talk about her issues and your role in them to just anybody.” Attila pointed at Shawn. “Except for the wife, I say he’s the only one you ever told. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Tanner kept his mouth shut. There was nothing he could say that wouldn’t give Attila some sort of ugly satisfaction. All he could do was refuse to play.

“I thought so.”

Behind his back, his wrists twisted and strained against the wire, another round of futility and pain. He’d never wanted to kill anyone. Not even Wade Shavers. He used to think the worst thing in the world would be being forced into a situation in which he had to. Now? Now the worst thing he could think of

was not living long enough to try.

Attila crossed over to kneel beside him, *on* him, one knee pressing into his chest to keep him from squirming, like being crushed under a rock. Nothing personal, just Attila going through his pockets until he retrieved his keys. He took them back to his crew and tossed them to the woman.

“Why don’t you take the honors of getting this off the street. My guess is—” Attila turned to shoot him a smirk. “—it’ll be a truck with a pair of brass balls hanging from the trailer hitch.”

They got to work then, the men suiting up in cheap, disposable coveralls before unrolling a body bag in FEMA blue. He couldn’t watch any more than that, had to turn his head away and try his best to block his ears to the thumps and thuds. It was only when he caught a whiff of some astringent smell that he realized they’d started cleaning up the blood.

They had done this before. They weren’t going at this like amateurs.

“There’s still going to be some stains,” the bearded guy said. “You may want to take a sander to this. To be safe.”

Attila made a sour grunt. “Or maybe I’ll just cut back on entertaining.”

Tanner ventured a look in time to see them tossing rags in with Shawn’s body. When they shucked their coveralls, those went in, too, then they zipped up the bag and that was it—Shawn was gone, downgraded to so much disposable waste now.

The two new men hoisted the bag by its handles. Instead of the stairs, the door out to the street, they headed toward the rear, through a narrow arched doorway in one corner, and were gone long enough it seemed likely there was another exit back there.

When Attila next came for him, he was holding a shaft of wood the length of a broomstick, but thicker, one end wrapped with the kind of matte black friction tape that might go around a hockey stick.

“How’s the circulation holding out?” Attila said. “Can you feel your fingers? Your toes?”

“They’re there. Mostly.”

“Mostly means you can walk, then. As comfortable as you may look, you

can’t stay here, like this. My floor is not a long-term solution.” He whapped the wood into his palm, a cop with a nightstick. “But let’s do this smart. If you can walk, you could try to run. Or kick. You see where I’m going with this?”

“Then why not just carry me out of here, too?”

“You haven’t earned the right. For all his faults, your pal went out on his shield. Until then, you walk.”

Attila unwound the hanger from the doorknob, then dropped Tanner’s feet to the floor and knelt across his shins while removing the other end from around his ankles. He stepped back to straighten the bends in the wire until he could feed it into a hole drilled through the untaped end of the stick.

“You know, you’re the second person today to tell me Daphne has work to do and I should leave her alone.”

Attila looked up from his twisting and rewinding, intrigued. “See? You don’t have to take my word for it. Who was the first?”

“The guy in the canyon we lost. The climber.”

Attila’s face contorted into a scowl. “The jumper you let jump, you mean. Tell it like it is, big brother. What did I warn you earlier about weasel words?” He seemed to relent, the closest thing to empathy he was capable of showing. “Two hundred and sixty feet in the air or not, that had to be a serious what-the-fuck moment for you.”

“Why him, though?” Tanner snapped. “This poor kid, why would something work through him?”

Attila went blank. “I don’t follow.”

“Why not Shawn? With him, it could’ve done so much more and I’d never have seen it coming. He cuts my rope . . . or pushes me off the top of the cliff before I’ve even clipped onto it . . . problem solved. Or why not go direct and fry me from the inside?”

“Your climber had two days of stress to soften him up, so . . . the path of least resistance? I told you earlier, the word *gods*, all it does is get the point across. I never said anything about omnipotence.” Attila cranked a few more twists to the wire where it joined the handle. “So, weakness is their friend. Don’t let it go to your head, but you and the boy wonder seem like these annoying

types with the kind of character and physiology that takes that option off the table. But . . . soften *you* up for a while too, who knows what might happen." He winked, then rounded the remainder of the wire into a loop. "Daphne, she's a tough nut to crack too. I really am beginning to dislike your parents."

"What *is* Daphne to you? What have you done to her?"

"I haven't done anything. I recognized." Attila fitted the loop around Tanner's neck. A collar. He'd been making a collar. "Do you like truffles?"

"How should I know?" Tanner tightened his neck muscles as Attila began to twist the loop closed. "I've never eaten the fucking things."

"Why did I not guess that." He gave the shaft a tug and seemed satisfied with its hold. "Truffles aren't easy to find. They might be two or three feet underground. What you need is a truffle pig to sniff them out."

Attila stepped back and gave the shaft and collar one more tug. "Up you go."

With his hands still bound in the small of his back, Tanner had to roll onto his knees before struggling to his feet. For the next indignity, Attila steered him from behind, pushing him across the loft toward the rear corner exit.

"Truffle hunting. Getting into that is a two-stage process," Attila said. "First you get yourself a pig. Then you train it. The pig may have some innate talent, a good nose, but it still needs to be trained. And Daphne . . . ? She's a very talented pig."

They passed through the doorway into a short hall at the back of the building, lit by the ugly, jaundiced glow of a forty-watt bulb. Through another doorway, unlocked and open now, they stepped across a tiled landing, then into a downward stairwell.

"I have a little knack for it myself. I think it probably goes back to a school bus accident I was in. There was a fire."

At this angle, with Attila in back of him, four stairs higher, the collar felt like a noose. He focused on every step, hadn't come this far to break his neck or crack his larynx.

"For Daphne, I'm guessing it must go back to that day she . . . well, I don't have to finish that thought, do I? It would be cruel of me to keep rubbing your nose in a thing like that, and I'm not a cruel person."

With two flights of stairs behind them, they had passed the ground floor. This was a trip to the basement.

“What is it you people think you’re hunting?”

“Just a higher form of fungus. But keep in mind, what constitutes choice morsels and rare delicacies, that’s all relative. It’s all about scale. Magnitude, again.”

The bottom of the stairs was as dim as the upstairs hall, with even less floor space. They’d come to a cinderblock wall; even in the low light, it didn’t look old. If the building had been standing for decades, the wall appeared to have been in place for no more than a few years, clean and smooth and painted an industrial red. The steel door in the middle, with the keypad? Definitely not an original fixture.

Attila opened up and steered him through. “So let’s just call them the truffles of the gods.”

The first thing to hit him was the chill.

The next, the sight of cages, six of them, and only four of them empty.

We had secrets between us, too, Bianca and me.

When somebody takes you to a place like that rock formation in the alpine woods beyond the Chapel on the Rock, it belongs to both of you, then. It becomes an “our place,” so it’s like a tiny betrayal of the other person to go there without them.

I did it anyway. I thought Bianca might even have understood. After all, she’d never gone back with Gregg.

Over the rest of the summer, I averaged once a week, like mini-vacations. At a few thousand feet higher, it was usually cooler, a relief from the dry heat below. Not much rain, but the summer was still the cloudiest I could recall, as if the earth was trying to hide . . . and who could blame our poor ball of rock? It was a time of unease on a grand scale, what with the disappearances of Europa

and Alpha Centauri . . . although while the planet itself may have been nervous, the world just shrugged. Distant suns and moons are like genocides in Africa—so remote they hardly get noticed, no matter how horrible what's happened really is.

Me, I had my private rock to commune with, always waiting for me up there in the thinner air, the two of us serenaded by the breathy murmur of wind through the pines. This formation that, I was coming to suspect, *remembered* being a wall, pillars, columns, a lintel.

I now knew what kind of stone it was: conglomerate, which some people regard as a kind of sandstone even though it's not, really. Sand can be part of it, but there are pebbles and granules of limestone and quartz and more, the sediment of 300 million years ago, stirred together and glued by deep time.

So how could it remember anything?

Especially from that long ago. There were no wall-builders then. No one to carve columns or raise pillars. There weren't even dinosaurs yet. Just swamps and volcanoes and warm, shallow seas, and land masses that, from space, looked nothing like they do today. These mountains, my Rockies? They were a dream of a future yet to unfold. It was a world without us, perfect and pure. And yet . . .

It possessed memories. Stubborn pockets of memory.

How did I know this? I can't say. Maybe it wasn't so much knowing as sensing, the kind of daydream play that led Albert Einstein to imagine himself riding on the end of a beam of light, approaching a clock, and seeing time tick backwards. But he knew where to take it from there, while I didn't have a clue.

And if I didn't, for sure neither did the bear that ambled in through the trees.

Bears don't amble quietly, but he was still there before I knew it. A black bear, so not as pants-fillingly terrifying as a Yellowstone grizzly might have been, but startling enough. If on his back twos instead of all fours, he might have stood tall enough to put him eye-to-eye with Attila.

People always warn you not to run, so I didn't, and the fright soon made way for curiosity, even wonder. The main thing I knew about black bears was that they wanted no part of us sparsely haired two-legs. There are eighty-year-olds who've hiked these mountains their whole lives and never seen one.

Yet, as I sat frozen on the softening trunk of a toppled tree, this one wandered up as if I were no more than a minor novelty that warranted a lifting of his head, a sniff of the air, and a mildly irritated grunt. Maybe this was his place, too. He chuffed and whuffled, once the great rock formation had his full attention again. He would look at it, then pace on his clawed catcher's mitt paws, look at it some more, and oh my god, Bianca was going to hate me forever that I got to see this and she didn't.

Ten feet away, the bear settled onto his rump with a heavy thud. I could smell the hairy woodland musk of him as he faced the stone, peering at it with sad brown eyes. Every now and then he would groan, and I knew it was wrong to give him human traits, but he still seemed perplexed to me. As if, despite his knowing nothing of lintels and columns, this formation was an enigma to him, too, drawing him back to sit and ponder how he might scratch his way through to an answer.

Twice he glanced over at me. *You too, huh? Ain't we a pair.* He whined in this throat, a sound more like a befuddled dog wondering where the ball went.

When the bird hit, the bear didn't know what to make of it any better than I did.

It too was big and black, a crow or a raven, a scythe that wheeled against the sky before it arced through the break in the canopy of pines, tucked its wings, and plunged without hesitation into the top of the rock formation. It hit with a soft slap and a burst of feathers, then bounced off and tumbled boneless to the ground.

And it was only the first.

They gathered in the sky overhead, soaring in from all points of the compass, and even from the ground I could spot that they weren't all the same. Birds of a feather flock together? Okay, Mom, that's one more thing you told me that's demonstrably untrue, along with how the monsters weren't going to get me. Big ones and little ones, black ravens and white gulls. Once they came pouring from the clouds I could make out cardinals and blue jays and somebody's bright green parrot, tiny brown wrens and plump quail and redheaded turkey vultures, and plenty more I had no idea what to call, a regular United Nations of birds, all

intent on one thing.

Obliteration.

They came in the way hail falls, at first a few, each impact a distinct event, then overlapping as they picked up the pace, until the sound was a nonstop barrage of meat on stone. Their pulped bodies ricocheted and whirled to earth, or adhered to the rock in the thickening residue of blood and shit, while a multicolored snow of feathers drifted after them.

Fifty must have died before I got over the shock and clambered off my log to back out of splattering range and toward the safety of more trees. Just in time, too, moments before a goose burst open and showered the earth with blood. Even the bear was spooked, with the wisdom to move before I did, reeling back onto all fours to gallop an ungainly retreat into the pines.

I thought of Bianca, her confession: *We're the same thing, this and me*, she had said fondly of the rock. *If I could, I would crawl inside it and melt with it and stay forever.*

I figured she had the good sense not to try, because just as stone beats scissors, rock beats flesh. But now? Now anything seemed possible. In chaos, there are no limits.

The meatstorm ended, as storms must, no more birds left to die, a terrible silence returning to the woods as the last feathers sifted down, not caring which bodies they joined.

How are you supposed to remain in the aftermath of something like this?

How are you supposed to walk away?

The bear ambled back before I could decide, nosing among the piles of beaks and feet and mangled bodies. Soon he turned sideways to the base of the stone, grunting with the effort—or maybe the relief—as he rubbed his flank against it as though he couldn't quite scratch all the way down to the itch.

There was always more room to fall. Always a lower level to go. Slaughter and

fetters and imprisonment, a lifetime of guilt narrowing to the blade of an axe—why stop there? Go on, keep falling. In captivity, you could find yourself a pariah, too.

"Don't talk to him! Don't tell this guy a thing!"

So said the occupant of one cage to the occupant of another. Short-haired and stocky, with what looked like tattoo sleeves visible at her wrists, she'd condemned him instantly, springing up and gripping her bars the moment Attila clunked the main door shut and left the three of them alone.

The other prisoner looked baffled—young, skinny, Asian, so soft-featured that Tanner couldn't tell it if was another woman or a very young man, until he heard a few words and decided this was a boy, a gentle teenage boy.

"It could be a trick. It could be a way to find more of us." The woman's voice was harsh and angry. And protective of the boy. Tanner picked up on that right away. "He's another one of them that we haven't seen yet. So don't give him *anything*."

"Oh." The kid looked across the chamber at him, two sets of bars between them. With an air of dejection, he turned to his wall and went fetal, curling into the nest of a sleeping bag.

Tanner gave the woman a pleading look. It was no act. "I'm not—"

"Save it. I don't want to hear it. You're not here, is what you're not."

She turned her back on him, too. If they were in the same cage, she might have been waiting to kill him in his sleep.

Tanner paced. Six feet by nine, the dimensions of his cage. Like the other two captives, he had a sleeping bag, a plastic jug of water, a lidded bucket with a roll of toilet paper. This was his world now.

The prison was big enough to hold six such cages, with room to spare—three on one side, three on another, with an aisle in between, and all of them bolted to the cinderblocks to keep them from toppling. Attila had caged him on the right, in the middle one, while the other two prisoners were on the left, at either end. Opposites, set apart from each other—it felt deliberate. Everything Attila did felt deliberate . . . even the lighting, weak and greenish and despairing, from naked fluorescent tubes flickering in white housings that dangled by chains from the

ceiling. He had to look ghastly under it. They all did.

So he paced. He wasn't ready to surrender to the sleeping bag yet and it helped keep him warm. The air felt as chilly as a meat locker. This wasn't cellar temperature, cave temperature. Something was keeping it a good ten degrees cooler than that.

Something to do with the hatch at the end, maybe? It was the only feature down here that made no apparent sense. This stark, rectangular room was a controllable prison constructed within the shell of the larger basement. One way in . . . two ways out? At the far end, opposite the entrance, this second portal was set in the middle of the blocks—rusted iron, almost square, studded with rivets and opened by a crank wheel. Like something from a submarine, or the side of a blast furnace. If the builders had gone to the trouble of erecting a wall around it, it had to have a purpose . . . he just couldn't guess what it was. From here, it appeared that it would merely open into the other end of the basement, but he couldn't see the sense of this.

"That iron hatch," he said. "Where does it go?"

The other two could only ignore him.

"Have you seen it opened?"

And ignore him they did.

Tanner stripped away his blue flannel shirt, down to his T-shirt. He needed to move. He needed to move *now*. The more he moved, the less he would have to think, and pacing wasn't cutting it. But he could do push-ups. He could do burpees and squats. He could hang from the overhead bars and halfway do pull-ups. Every rep dug a claw into his sore spots from earlier, and he came to crave the pain, past caring whether it was penance or motivation. He banged out the reps until he began to cramp, then leaned against the bars as steam fumed from his body into the chill.

He watched it rise.

He watched it change direction and drift.

There couldn't have been any drafts down here. There was no crack in the door, no chinks between the blocks. Yet, before they dissipated, the wisps of steam wafted toward the iron hatch. Like the smoke in Wade Shavers' toolshed,

sucked inward to some ephemeral point at the heart of the stove.

He could see nothing about this that wasn't worrying.

After another hour, the door opened and everybody roused. It wasn't Attila, but the older man, carrying a fast food bag. He slipped it between the bars of the cage, the warmest thing Tanner had felt all night.

"It isn't mealtime, but your host thought it may have been some time since you last ate. It's not his wish for you to go hungry."

A couple of cheeseburgers and a supersize order of fries. Apparently it wasn't his host's wish to worry about nutrition, either, but he was glad to have them. They filled a hole.

The white-haired man lingered to watch him eat, a wry twist to his seamed mouth, half smile, half smirk. "I saw you looking to me upstairs, from your place on the floor. My choice of words is deliberate. Looking *to* me, not at me. You see the difference, don't you?"

The bun was soggy, the cheese rubbery. Tanner didn't care. The smell alone was driving him into wolf mode. "I'm not sure I do."

"Yes, you know exactly what I'm talking about." The man refocused his gaze into some middle distance, tilting his head and lilting his voice into a mockery of hope. *"Oh, look at him. He looks so kindly. If I implore him long enough, I'm sure he'll be the one to talk sense to the savages."*

When he turned to peer back between the bars again, the man had lost that earlier hint of smirk, his wooly eyebrows lifting as the lines of his face softened into a serene smile, as delightful as an old cherub.

"I'm grateful for many things," he said. "None more so than this magnificent disguise."

His scrutiny began to feel unnerving, a check upon Tanner's appetite as the salt from the fries scoured his tongue. He glanced across at the other cages. The woman and the boy had squeezed toward the very backs of theirs, studiously not looking this way, as if it would render them invisible.

"You're giving yourself too much credit," Tanner said. "All I ever saw was four psychopaths, one with white hair."

The man beamed his sweet smile, starting to curdle with its feigned pity.

“And already does the prisoner edit and reorder the fragments of his memory. It’s easier that way, isn’t it? Whatever lie to yourself works best in the moment, that’s the one you’ll grab for.”

Tanner stripped away the wrapper for the second burger and was two bites in when his teeth his gristle. Not a lump, but a layer. He yanked it from his mouth and peeled back the bun and the room turned upside-down, so he shut his eyes until it rolled back right again. An ear, that’s all it was. He could deal. No coughing things up, no flinging it aside. Just an ear. Shawn was beyond pain. An ear meant nothing.

Tanner peeled it free of the meat and washed it with water from his jug, then set it in the center of the wrapper. With as much reverence as he could bring to the task, he folded the paper around it and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

“At least that much of him will get buried right.”

He slapped the bun back on the burger and willed himself to eat the rest. No telling when the next meal would be coming, or if.

On the other side of the bars, the smile drained from the white-haired man’s face, leaving behind a gargoyle of wrinkles and malevolence.

“You might have been something. Instead, I see a man who’s wasted his life in the worst ways, for the worst reason possible. He tricked himself into thinking he saw value in the lives of fools who should’ve been left to perish right where they were.” The man began to back toward the door. “You thwarted the natural order. All those people you’ve helped further their inconsequential lives . . . what could you possibly have seen in them that was worth saving?”

Tanner waved him away. “Maybe you should take the rest of the night off and ask yourself why trying to look insightful is so important to you. Is it all you’ve got left?”

The man slid close again, his seamed face flush with the bars, his voice a whisper between clenched teeth. “Before this is over for you, maybe we can discuss my insights into your bone marrow.”

When he left, the chamber returned to stasis, chilly and silent, with gangrenous light.

“I’m Giang.” The boy was back at the front of his cage. “And that’s

Francesca.”

She whirled and whacked the bars with her palm. “Goddamn it, what did I tell you earlier? Don’t give—”

“He’s not one of them, Frannie. That wasn’t a put-on show to trick us. You’d see that if your mind wasn’t already made up. You’ve just been down here too long.”

“How long *have* you been down here?”

“It’s been about three weeks for me.” Giang tipped his head toward Francesca. “A little longer. And the old dude, we think his name is Desmond. They don’t talk much about each other around us, but sometimes they slip.”

“What do they want with you?”

This yanked Francesca’s attention back to him, and it wasn’t kind. He found himself fascinated by how, after a month down here, her hair was still bristly enough to stand on end. Spite, maybe. “What makes you put it that way? You sound like you know exactly what they want with *you*. But for the two of us, you can’t make the connection?”

“I’m here because they want something with my sister and they think I’ll make good leverage for that.” He decided the rest of the story could wait.

“Who’s your sister?”

“Her name’s Daphne. Daphne Gustafson.”

“Never heard of her.”

“She never mentioned a Francesca, so I guess she never heard of you, either.”

Giang winced, seemed to dislike the bickering. He tried a different tactic. “When you were a little boy, what’s the strangest thing you used to do? You don’t have to remember it. Maybe your parents told you about it.”

He dredged his memory but came up empty. Nothing seemed all that out of the ordinary. “They used to find me in the mornings sometimes sleeping backwards in my bed, on my back, with my legs bent up over the headboard. When I was still asleep once, I told them it was because I was an astronaut in my space capsule.”

Giang and Francesca checked in with each other, wordlessly. With a sour

look, she shook her head.

“Scooch up into the corner of your cage closest to me,” she said. “Now stick your bony face right up between those bars and look me straight on. Don’t you even blink.”

As soon as he complied, she did the same, as though they were having a staring context.

“I’ve been down here long enough, I bet I see a lot better in this shitty light than you do. What I want to see, just to make sure about you, is the reaction on your face and the look in your eyes when I say this one word . . . *atavist*.”

There’s a limited number of things that are supposed to fall from the sky. Rain. Snow. Hail. Cherry blossoms and cottonwood fluff. The occasional airplane.

Fish? No. Frogs? No! But it’s still happened a few times, by means that no one has ever witnessed.

A rain of birds, though? It seems so unlikely. Fish and frogs don’t fly. Birds only have to do what comes naturally to land easy. So when they fall en masse, they’re dead or dying already. Things like mid-air collisions and freak weather fronts with nobody around to de-ice your wings . . . those can bring down a flock in a hurry.

But they’re always the same species. Homogeneity in catastrophe.

What Smokey Bear and I saw was something different, beyond an event like the beaching of whales. With whales, it seems to be some group blunder, a navigation error. It was hard to view this bird spectacle as anything other than a cross-species act of mass suicide.

Unless, like Bianca, all they’d really wanted was to *merge*.

When I went looking for it, I couldn’t find any historical precedent for this sort of behavior, as long as you counted history as anything that happened longer ago than the past ten days.

That’s right. Three near-identical incidents, in three different locations

around the world, all within the previous week and a half. One happened in the French Alps, on a hillside overlooking Chamonix. Another occurred in Australia, at Kuniya Piti, the eastern tip of the big red Outback monolith known as Uluru. The third befell a 700-year-old oak tree in a town square in Pont-Rouge, Quebec. That one came with a clear cell phone video.

If three such events were verified, then there were probably more. These were just the ones with enough witnesses to make them newsworthy. Any number of feathery bloodbaths could have gone unseen in more remote places, piles of mix-and-match carcasses waiting to be discovered by someone with no idea how to read what had really happened.

Those who could were always a scattered minority. Like Brodie. Like Bianca. It hurts my heart to think how few of them must have found each other until now.

It's funny, you know? When you live in silence with something long enough, the way Bianca had, it gets easy to think you're the only one it affects. When you're young enough, or lonely enough, ashamed or confused enough, there's a world of misery you can delude yourself into believing nobody else has experienced until it happened to you.

Like when Bianca stabbed Gregg. She was hardly the first woman who got so fed up with the abuse she snapped and tried to kill her husband. But I'd bet my life that, at the time, it felt to her like she was.

How can I be so sure of this? Because I couldn't have been the first person to answer her phone and hear a shaky, panic-soaked "I didn't know who else to call," but it felt that way to me. They never teach you these things in school.

Of course I dropped everything and went. This was Bianca, for god's sake. It was only Val and his not-half-as-tasty-as-he-thinks-they-are pumpkin pancakes that I was bailing on, so it wasn't like I had a better offer for how to spend a lazy Saturday. Help you deal with the spousal unit bleeding on your dining room floor? Well, it's not the mani-pedi date with you I had my heart set on, but it'll do.

The part that stomped me in the heart waited until I was two blocks out of the driveway. Magpie—where was she in all this? How much had she seen?

When Bianca disengaged the locks and opened the door I could only stand there looking at her for a few moments. Then I touched her face, reaching for her slowly, very slowly, so she wouldn't flinch on instinct.

Goddamn it, I knew it—that was my reaction. *I knew Gregg was a hitter, and why didn't you tell me before it got to this?*

"I have a couple loose teeth," she mumbled. "It's okay, I can chew on the other side for a while."

Bianca was round-faced to begin with, but now the left side was rounder still. And bruised. So no, not okay. Nothing about this was okay.

"I need you to do me a favor." She'd calmed down between the phone call and my arrival. How could she be this calm? "I need you to pick up Magpie and take her to my mother's. Would you, please?"

Three cheers for overnight play dates.

I didn't make it past the living room, where not one thing looked out of order, before Bianca steered me left, down the hallway to Magpie's bedroom. A grown-up suitcase was waiting on the bed, so I fumbled around as Bianca called out instructions from elsewhere in the house: Clothes for another week, you know what she likes. Just be sure to pack the My Little Pony sweatshirt that's in there; she's already got Rainbow Dash with her, but she'll have a meltdown without Pinkie Pie as an alternate. Fresh underwear and socks. But no green ones because this week she doesn't like green. Oh, and that pillow on her bed, the one that looks like a purple pile of poo. And pull her nightlight from the wall. The bathroom—don't forget the bathroom! Grab her shampoo, it's the bottle next to the penguin in the kayak. But pack him, too.

Five surreal minutes of this, as every so often I'd hear Gregg sputter and moan.

I guess it was somewhere between the pony and the penguin that I transformed into a willing accomplice.

Then it was Aunt Daphne to the rescue. Bianca paved the way with a phone call, so I wouldn't show up unannounced. All I had to do was not flub the lie about a happy household stricken by stomach flu. Magpie sold the rest, when she squealed and hit me around both legs with a flying hug launched from

somewhere near the Wyoming border.

It all went perfectly until we reached the car, and I dropped an emphatic S-bomb.

"That's a bad word." Magpie was very solemn about this. "You're not supposed to say that word."

"Yeah, Aunt Daphne is super sorry about that," I told her. But how else are you supposed to react when your perfect scheme is already falling apart because nobody thought of a car seat. "We're going to play a fun game, okay? If I say *cop car*, you duck as far down in your seat as you can, okay?"

From best aunt ever to child endangerment, in one easy move.

But it was all so normal, too. We'd never been alone this way, just the two of us, and we fell into it so fast that nothing could've felt more natural. I love you and you love me, and everything else is only so much planetary debris. I could look over at her little dark-haired head and uncontaminated smile, and see a future I might've had if I'd been left with the least bit of confidence that I could keep it all together. My biological clock was a long way from winding down, but still . . . I knew, deep inside, that this option was gone.

It didn't go without one last fight. The two of us rode along, me thinking, *This is what life really is, the way it's supposed to be without all the bullshit*, until I realized I was so good at pretending here, I was ignoring that the only reason we were together was *because* of the bullshit. So I had this one crazy shortcut to motherhood, didn't I?

What would happen if I kept on driving? Never mind Grandma, she's the past, I'm the future, and me and you are going on a big adventure. No more boomeranging between Attilas and Vals for me, no more big brother riding to the rescue. And as for you, short stuff, no more asshole dad who's going to lay hands on you one way or another someday. It's just us now.

I suspected Bianca wouldn't mind, that I could call her from Utah and she'd understand, might even be relieved. I could work on transitioning Magpie a little at a time: *Your bio-mom never actually wanted you, if you must know. Not the way you are. She was hoping you'd come out with flippers.*

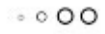
But. Over the freeway and through the streets, to Grandmother's house we

went.

Yeah, it was hard.

But even if I'd given in to temptation, none of it would have mattered anyway, would it? A few stolen days of renegade happiness—that's all it could ever have been, until it ended in sorrow and regrets and awe and tears, until even the tears dissolved, as the Great Cycle came to a close once again, for maybe the trillionth time.

Oh, Attila. Of all the miserable excuses for men I encountered in this life, why did you have to be the second worst, and why did you have to be the one who was right?



He'd found it easy to get used to the cold, if not the captivity. Never that. If he ever did, then it would mean he was halfway to dead already.

Tanner had no watch, so he couldn't be sure of the interval, but every so often an alarm went off inside and it was time to move again. He was a caged animal with opposable thumbs, and had options. Push-ups. Pull-ups. Lunges and burpees and leg-lifts. It kept him loose and his blood warm.

The first day and a half, Francesca and Giang looked over at him like he was crazy. *Get a load of the new guy. Calm yourself, new guy. None of this is going to make a difference. You aren't going to bend bars. You aren't going to tear down walls or rip metal doors from their hinges. You'll learn, new guy.* He could feel their eyes on him, and the bemused scorn of their dwindling hope.

Then they started following along.

"It feels good to be sore from something else besides sleeping on concrete," Francesca admitted.

At least Giang got out twice a day to stretch, but at the cost of being pressed into service emptying everyone's slop buckets.

This was his life now, this place, these people. He had a family and feared for them, and decided if he ever was to see them again, he could have to forget

them in the interim. Beryl and Reese were a luxury he couldn't afford down here. He gave himself that first day to wallow in recollections of the sight and feel and smell of them. Then, like Shawn's ear, he put them away, not to be opened again until he could do so in some better version of later. Because he was a caged animal with a boundless new capacity for murder, and this was his life now, and he had to be present for every moment of it.

If it was imperative to understand your enemy, then that was his main weakness. He still couldn't figure out what Attila and the others wanted.

Tanner wasn't ready to buy into what Francesca had called *atavists*—it felt too delusional. But he could believe other people believed it. After all, Giang had. He'd had to come here to become a convert. Nabbed and imprisoned and not knowing the reason, why wouldn't the poor kid believe? That was how brainwashing worked. Kinship, understanding, and answers—it gave him all that and more. It solved the riddle of why breathing air, the most natural thing in the world, had always felt wrong to Giang; why he had always been clumsy, stumbling through an atmosphere that felt much too thin, even on a thick, humid day at sea level. It never held him up the way he thought it should.

So. If there were people who bought into such things about themselves, then it followed that there must have been others who believed it, too, and found something about it to hate. Enough to kill? Why not. Fanatics could always find a rationale for murder. Fanatics had been murdering for their ideas about gods ever since they started hearing their gods tell them it was a good idea.

Truffles of the gods, Attila had said.

Different gods, maybe, but the same old bloodlust.

These things they told him about themselves, he tried to apply to Daphne, but couldn't make them fit. Giang and Francesca claimed to have never felt at home in the world, and for most of their lives the reason had been a mystery to them, just that they must have been born wrong.

Daphne, though, had been broken. You could point to the date when it happened. She'd been broken, put back together, and the seams showed. However patient he'd tried to be with her, he wished he'd been even more so. She'd never deserved such a thing.

But maybe he did, for having let it happen.

So maybe this place, these captors upstairs and their tools of torment, were the reassembled pieces of a choice he wished he could've made years ago—to take it back on Daphne's behalf, and if it had to happen, take it upon himself. He'd heard a theory, more crazy-talk, that time was an illusion and everything was happening at once in some vast, all-encompassing now.

If you want to break somebody, break me.

He could pray for that and truly mean it, with the best of all possible outcomes being the sight of Wade Shavers walking through the door, alive again, a hammer in his hand and need in his eyes.

So when, for the first time since the doors had shut behind him three nights ago, Attila and his cohort came in all four at once, he was ready. *Let this be for me. Leave these other two alone. Break the new guy. I'm here because of the sin I've been waiting to pay for since I was twelve years old. Can't you see that?*

But when the last of them came through the doorway, the guy with the black beard and shaved head—Gregor was his name, Francesca thought—he was ushering in a fresh captive. He didn't even need their wired stick. With Gregor's hand pinched around her upper arm, she stumbled along in her heels with vacant eyes and a sloppy, intermittent grin. Sunday morning wasted, still buzzed from Saturday night, with no idea where she was, or who she was with, or what could happen to her now that she was here.

Tanner rattled the bars of his cage. As Gregor steered the young woman between the cages, Giang and Francesca watched with unease equal to his own, as though they'd never seen events proceed this way before. When Gregor got her to the far end of the prison, he let her wobble to the floor, splay-legged in front of the iron hatch. When he returned to the others, she looked hurt and confused, and mumbled something about his promises.

That was when the gas masks came out.

Desmond saved his for last. All the better for him to keep a mocking gaze and his sweet, corrosive smile fixed on Tanner as he stepped into the middle of the room, holding a metal canister the size of a steel water bottle.

Now, finally, on went the mask, his white hair curling around it like a

nimbus.

Desmond pulled a ring free to activate it, then set the canister on the floor as it began to spew a jet of pale fog that rose and dispersed.

Captives all, they looked to each other, frantic for answers that weren't there. *Sorry new guy, but you don't know shit and never did.*

He held his breath as long as he could.

After delivering Magpie to her grandmother, I took my time driving back to Bianca, hoping that one problem, at least, would have resolved itself by the time I got there. No such luck. Gregg was hanging on, still sprawled on the dining room floor, propped against one wall, in a sticky puddle of blood, with a soppy dishtowel balled up over his abdomen. She'd poked him a good one in the shoulder, too, and bashed him in the head and face a few times with something that had broken into scattered fragments of thick ceramic.

In the kitchen, a long bread knife lay in the sink, still in need of cleaning. Jesus, she'd stuck it deep, and more than once by the look of things. Belly wounds will nearly always turn fatal if untreated, but it takes a long time—the kind of useful info you pick up when you let an Attila into your life.

Gregg roused when he heard me, eyes creaking open, his high forehead traced with dried blood that had dribbled from his scalp. "You bitch," he muttered at me. "You fucking bitch."

God, how they love that phrase.

I knelt a few feet away, out of range but level, eye-to-eye. I really wanted to look him straight on. "What did *I* do?"

"Everything was fine . . . before she met you."

A heavy coffee mug winged in from the side and beaned off his skull with a thunk. His head snapped against the wall and he groaned as fresh blood streamed.

"It was *not* fine!" Bianca shot me an imploring look as if I were the one who

needed convincing. “It wasn’t.”

This much was true: Gregg was an unholy mess, dying, and it seemed like the best option all around to not get in the way of that. I was strangely all right with it. I’d never seen this much blood before, and I was all right with that, too.

Like Bianca earlier, how could I be this calm? Because I was meant for things like this? I’d been touched by great violence once, then touched by something far stranger, and it had worked its way inside because, why . . . it had a use for me? It was striving to convince me to kill Bianca, or someone like her, even if I didn’t know why?

But you know what? I was sick of feeling like I was made for no better reason than to acquiesce to other agendas for my life.

Gregg started to whimper, with quivering lips and frightened eyes—genuine, or switching tactics? Either way, it looked weak. Attila would’ve despised him for it.

“You had yourself a good partner there,” I told him. “You couldn’t just let her be herself, quirks and all?”

His anguished eyes tracked her over my shoulder. I had no way of sorting through all the contradictions they revealed. “She’s not normal. I just want her to be normal.”

“Do you not get it? The reason you probably fell in love with her was because she *isn’t* normal.” I dropped my voice in pitch, going for that reasonable-yet-aggrieved tone that came so naturally to Gregg. *“There’s something about her, I can’t put my finger on what it is, but I like it. She’s different!”* I picked up the ceramic mug that had bounced from his head. “Yeah, that never lasts.” I understood the urge to use the mug with bad intentions. “You pathetic little weasel. Take what you don’t understand and try to beat it into something you can. Look where it’s gotten you now.”

I took the mug back to the sink.

How had this happened, I wondered. How did it erupt so irrevocably like this? When I looked at Bianca, I didn’t need to say anything. She spent awhile peering at the floor, working her tongue inside her swollen cheek, then looked at the two-seater breakfast table in a far corner of the kitchen. The tablecloth was

stained with a coffee spill, now dry, and Bianca's laptop sat there, screen up and asleep.

Okay. Ground Zero. Got it.

I poked a key to wake it up and found she'd had it open to a browser window, with more tabs on standby. According to the banner across the top, Bianca had been perusing the site of some matronly looking psychologist named Liz Goldblatt. I still recognized that string of accredited letters following her name. What I could see of the page mostly appeared to be a list of bullet points.

- Memories of a past life you don't necessarily identify as being human, or as having occurred on this planet, possibly cited as a child and forgotten, or persisting into adulthood.
- Frequent or continual feelings of not belonging to this world, possibly compounded by specific impressions of a world you feel you do belong to.
- Current or past use of words, phrases, or entire vocabularies that do not correlate with any known language.
- Persistent feeling that any or all among the sun, moon, constellations, and daytime and nighttime skies are not as they should be, either in appearance or arrangement.
- Inexplicably powerful attractions to certain people, animals, or natural features such as individual trees, stones, vegetation, etc.

It went on like that, a checklist that practically defined the short, tragic life of Brodie Baxter; the misgivings that Bianca had been dealing with all along.

"There's a name for people like me," she said. "Atavists. Somebody came up with the name atavists."

I clicked through the other browser tabs. There was a questionnaire to fill out and send to Dr. Goldblatt. A private forum for registered site users. A welcome page—Bianca had apparently just registered. She'd opened a handful of the forum threads, one of which had a subject heading that felt uncomfortably relevant to me, too: **We are being stalked and killed.**

"The answers are out there, if you keep looking," she said. "One thing always leads to another. I just had to start following the right trail of crumbs."

When she reached over to hold my arm I thought she was going to cry. But

then I remembered I'd never seen her cry, and didn't think I ever would.

"Knowing you, feeling your acceptance . . . this is what gave me the courage to finally go looking."

She hadn't treated her cheek yet, so I went to the freezer to whip up a makeshift ice pack. As I spared a look at Gregg zoning in and out against the dining room wall, it seemed easy enough now to piece together how events had played out this morning.

Bianca has her coffee and her laptop and, with Magpie bunking a few blocks away, the kind of peace and quiet she never gets to enjoy on a Saturday morning. Maybe she Googles her symptoms. *Inability to connect with my own child as a living, breathing part of me.* Maybe she's been doing that all week. She must have been enthralled, finding that first real crumb or two to start following.

Enter Gregg. I can't see him being eager to share her discovery. But I can see him reading over her shoulder. She could have been so absorbed she never realized he was there. He's seen enough, though, had enough, and reacts the only way that appeals to his sense of immediate results. It's time to beat the weird out of her.

Be normal. That's all I've ever asked for. Just be normal, you fucking bitch.

Those smooshy thighs of hers could be deceptive. There's muscle down in there, too, a good sturdy base to fight from. By now Gregg thinks she wouldn't dare. No more free lunch for him, though. She opens up his belly and cuts that lunch right out.

"I think I'll be okay for the rest of this," she told me. "You can go if you want."

What, back home to Val? To deflect, lie, spare his sensibilities?

In for a penny, in for a pound of flesh.

"I think I should stay."

Bianca gave me that look I knew so well, but never from her: *Suit yourself. Don't say I didn't warn you.*

She took the bread knife from the sink, then, after a moment's contemplation, snatched the cleaver from the wood cutlery block and marched for the dining room.

“You want to know what my problem is?” she said to Gregg. “I’ll tell you what my problem is. You deserve that much.”

Uh oh. She didn’t make *deserve* sound kind and considerate at all.

“I’ll show you.”

When she dropped next to him, I should have seen it coming. The way he was sitting, one hand braced against the floor . . . that polished hardwood made a perfect cutting board. She chopped down with the cleaver and sent three stubs rolling. It took Gregg a moment to register what had happened, before he started to squeal, and by then Bianca was back at work, slicing here and chopping there—nothing big, nothing vital, nothing he couldn’t live without.

I couldn’t watch, not after the fingertips. But I could hear, and it was agonizing to listen to, for both their sakes. My friend had been driven to this. As for Gregg, he could’ve spent the rest of his privileged life contemplating the secrets of the universe, if he’d just asked nicely.

She gave him time to settle down, until he wasn’t squawking anymore, and I tuned back in. She held his fingertips in front of his face, one by one, making sure he saw them, then brought them into the kitchen and flung one into the waste can. Another she dropped in the sink for the garbage disposal to grind up and rinse away. She disappeared with the third one. After a toilet flushed, she was back again.

“Now they’re scattered. Who knows how far apart they’ll end up? Do you see?”

I had no idea what Gregg was capable of seeing now, while Bianca was only getting started. She opened a window and flipped one of his ears out into the back yard. And teeth—god, she’d bashed out teeth. It was the front door for those, as far as she could fling them.

“Every direction, scattered. Now do you see?”

The merciful thing would’ve been for Gregg to not know any more, not feel anymore. But the way he said “No,” a high, sobbing croak ripped from the heart of sorrow, told me he was still very much in the game.

I’ve been to the toolshed, remember. I know how long these things can go on.

“We’ll have to get rid of you,” Bianca said. “Maybe I’ll take your head down to Pueblo. Maybe we can take your arms and legs up in the mountains and leave them for the cougars and the bears. The rest of you, maybe I’ll find a nice incinerator somewhere and throw it in and watch for which way the smoke goes.”

She paused a moment, waiting for some sign of cognizance.

“You still don’t understand it, do you?”

Of course he didn’t. He was too busy blubbering.

“These pieces of you . . . they’ll rot. *You’ll* rot. You’ll burn. You’ll dissolve in water. You’ll get eaten and digested and part of you will end up as part of the cougar, and the rest it’ll poop out, and that will fertilize something else. Then that will die and rot, and the cougar too, and what used to be you will keep moving on. Nothing gets wasted. It gets broken down smaller and smaller and used again and again . . .

“Are you starting to see yet?”

I didn’t know about Gregg, but holy shit, for real—I thought I was starting to.

“Then someday, in a million years, or a billion, or so far from now there’s not even a number for it . . . in this version of the universe, or in the next one to come, or another one after that . . . these particles that used to be you . . . they’ll end up together again. Against trillions-to-one odds, they’ll find each other again. They probably won’t look like you anymore. They’ll be stirred into something totally different. But down deep inside, something in them will recognize each other and will connect back to before, to now, and they’ll have memories of what they used to be together. They’ll remember being you. Part of them will *want* to be you again . . . and whatever it is they’ve become, that’s going to make that living being think it’s crazy.”

She stepped closer and punted Gregg in the face.

“*That’s* what an atavist is. *That’s* my problem.”

He was reacting about like you’d expect him to by now.

“This future you, whatever it is, maybe it will remember that kick. And maybe I’ll be there, too . . . something that’s like you then, or something

completely different. Whatever we are in this other world, maybe we'll meet, and when that happens, you'll know this future me. You won't know why, but you'll recognize me."

Another *namaste* thing. The archaic form in me recognizes the archaic form in you.

"There will just be something about me. You won't understand why, you'll only know you hate me. Just like I'll know I hate you. What happens next . . . who knows?"

Bianca pulled a chair away from the dining table and straddled it backwards as she pressed the ice pack to her cheek again, settling down for as long as it took him to finish dying.

"You go first," she said.

Tanner had no idea how long he'd been out. Only minutes, probably, but once he started coming around again, he had no sense of passing time. It wasn't like sleep. More like anesthesia. There was then, and there was now, and any sense of in-between had been erased.

Whatever they'd spewed into the air had left him with a headache hacking down through the center of his skull. He was still in his cage, but the rest were empty, all five of them now. If he was the last one left, he couldn't be the new guy anymore.

The far end of the prison, that was where they were. Where everybody was. Everybody but him. Because he was leverage, a tool kept around to utilize another time.

And hey, look at that—the iron hatch was wide open.

He'd never seen the purpose of the thing, not if all it did was open into the front of the basement. It didn't, from what he could make out . . . even if he couldn't tell what, exactly, it *had* opened into. Some smaller chamber, with walls that appeared close and confining, blackened with grime.

Oh god—don’t let it be a furnace.

Because Giang, Francesca, the newcomer with disheveled hair and smeary eyes . . . they were lying in it. The view from his cage was of the tops of their heads, their bare shoulders. They’d been stripped. They’d been bound together with nylon rope, all three of them facing inward to one another, nose to nose and chest to chest, then loaded feet-first, like a stack of wood.

So Jesus god, please not a furnace.

And he didn’t think it was. The more intently he scrutinized, the more puzzled he became by what its walls were made of. They didn’t look like metal, weren’t straight or squared off. He couldn’t see a back to the chamber. It seemed to go on, extending deeper into darkness, black and uneven, anything but smooth, lumpy here and jagged there, like a throat made of coal.

Stranger yet, would a furnace emit such cold? With the hatch open, the space beyond seemed to exhale its own air. The temperature in the room must have dropped another fifteen degrees, cold enough for the breath to cloud from his mouth, then drift toward the opening as though suctioned. No furnace he knew of would do that.

Only the stove in Wade Shavers’ toolshed.

But here, the pull, the cold, the freezing dread, were magnitudes more powerful.

Inside the blackened maw, they were coming back to consciousness as well, starting to squirm against each other. One of them had begun to murmur, then gasp and sob, impossible to tell who. Anybody might sound like that in there.

Tanner found his voice again. He found his feet. He found his place along the bars and banged on them, begging Attila and the others to stop, please stop. Yeah, he was cracking. Obviously. Behaving as if they would care what a disposable tool had to say. His third morning here and already he was cracking.

They’d shed their gas masks by now. The woman, Evvie, stepped up to the mouth of the chamber, something in her hand—bigger than a billiard ball, smaller than a baseball, army-issue olive drab. She pulled the safety pin and let the spring-loaded lever pop free while she reached inside to stuff it into the hollow between the captives’ bound bodies. Attila slammed the hatch shut on

their screaming and speed-cranked the wheel to lock it, just before a heavy, muffled thump came from behind the iron as the grenade went off, leaving Tanner that much closer to losing his mind.

Crazier still, the sound of the blast didn't end. It continued, changing over time, rolling off into an improbable distance as though fed through a pipe, then evolving into a sustained ringing tone. Reverberant, it hovered somewhere between the peal of a bell and the swell of a gong, a sound meant for summoning. The basement floor thrummed with the depths of it. The cage bars quivered in his hands.

When Attila cranked the hatch open again, the carnage was as horrific as Tanner had expected. Giang, Francesca . . . he hadn't come to know them well, there hadn't been time for that, but he'd cared for them as fiercely as if he had. Along with the newcomer, they now painted the blast chamber's ragged walls. They dripped from the inside of the iron door. They were pulp and ruin and tangles of shattered ribs.

As Attila and his cohort stood back watching, soon they began to move again.

Under their own power . . . ? No, more like the time, in the mountains, when he had seen the carcass of a mule deer jerk and twitch, and only moments later spotted the cougar that was dragging it behind some brush. Like that, with nothing here so prosaic as a scavenger. The sight was as mesmerizing as it was revolting, because he couldn't conceive of how such a thing could be happening.

In the lingering smoke, he began to see the cause, the tendrils and filaments that crept forward from deeper inside. They stirred the haze, displaced the haze, became part of the haze. They probed and enveloped, ensnared and encircled and fed. The harder they worked, the redder they turned, and the easier it was to see them, like a circulatory system materializing out of thin air. They drank and digested, and dragged bones back into the darkness. They scoured the chamber's walls, then ventured out to mop the floor before it and swab the crevices and mechanisms of the hatch.

He had never witnessed anything that felt more unholy than this.

As for Attila, for Desmond, for Gregor and Evvie, he could only interpret

their watchful stillness as reverence.

It took as long as it took, until the tendrils withdrew, and the chamber looked clean enough to use again with the next victims none the wiser. The door clanged shut, the crank wheel spun, and the bone-hungry cold remained behind.

After the others left, Attila stayed, looking down at him from on high. At some point Tanner had slid down his bars to the floor.

“There’s just something about three or more of them together that really sends out the call, don’t ask me why. Best guess? Some kind of critical mass,” Attila said. “You hear preachers talk about a pipeline to God . . . ? Here, it’s not empty talk.”

“God,” Tanner whispered. “That was your . . .” He couldn’t finish.

“Like I told you the other night, that’s only a label that gets a point across. Scale, remember. Enormity. Not role.”

“But you’re still making . . .” The cold had such a grip on him he could barely move. “An offering.”

“Well, you got me there.” Attila hitched his thumb toward the empty cages. “They tell you what they were? They had to, right, once you won them over with that can-do personality of yours.”

“Something they called atavists. Yeah. They told me what they *believed* they were. What you must believe they were.”

“Seeing is believing. You were watching the same show I was. Do you believe now?”

“I believe you’re the sickest excuses for human beings I’ve ever heard of.”

“Flatterer.” Attila flashed him a coy look, then hunkered close, at the corner of the cage. “Us, here? We’re small time. We’re just an outpost. This is Siberia. But we do what we can.”

“There are more of you?” No thought could have appalled Tanner more.

“As humble as it may be, do you think something like this little playhouse happens on its own, without some deep pockets behind it, and a long history of knowledge? This has been going on at least since the Fourth Crusade. That’s the one that never made it to Jerusalem and got stuck in Constantinople. I appreciate Christian-on-Christian violence as much as anybody, but that was something

special. You'd have to revise a lot of history books to cover all the positives that came out of that. Never let anybody tell you that war isn't the most productive force for good on earth."

A sound almost like a laugh slipped from Tanner. "I would bet an eye that you've never been closer to a war than a continent away."

"You think you're Odin now? You could do with the wisdom, that's true." Attila reached in to buddy-slap him on the shoulder. "There are two kinds of people, big brother. Those who go fight the wars, and those who watch and learn from what happens, and then apply it. What you just saw down here, imagine it happening on an industrial scale. Imagine freaks like these getting rounded up and pulped in the kinds of quantities where you *really* catch the attention of the gods. That's when the clouds part and the Sistine Chapel ceiling gets repainted with a brand new cast of characters, and if you have the stomach for it, you get a mind-blowing demonstration of what the word 'connoisseur' can really mean. And the best part is . . . I don't have to imagine."

"You're telling me you've seen this."

"The Czech Republic, nine years ago. It left an impression."

Tanner wanted to vomit. "Why do you have to treat them . . . *that way*?"

"It's the principle of the thing, an old one. I don't expect you've ever heard it. 'The souls of those who quit the body violently are most pure.'" He grinned. "Or maybe it helps if we chew their food for them a little."

Tanner sat up straighter against his wall of bars. "What's in it for you? Really? What could you people be getting out of this?"

"Come on, now. You're not that dense. What have people always wanted from the gods?"

Now Tanner's laughter almost sounded real. "You seek their favor, so they'll give you what you want? It's bullshit. It's always been bullshit."

"You are one willfully blind motherfucker, aren't you? Listen . . . accept it or don't, but there's a purity to these people that reaches back across time on scales that you and I can't even get our heads around. Places, too, plants and animals even, but I'm focused on the people. They didn't choose it. It just happened. It's how their parts came together. But to something that understands matter and

energy on such an intuitive level . . . how much source power do you think must be concentrated in a body like that? What do you think absorbing someone like that must *taste* like?"

Tanner mouthed it, didn't speak it. *Truffles.*

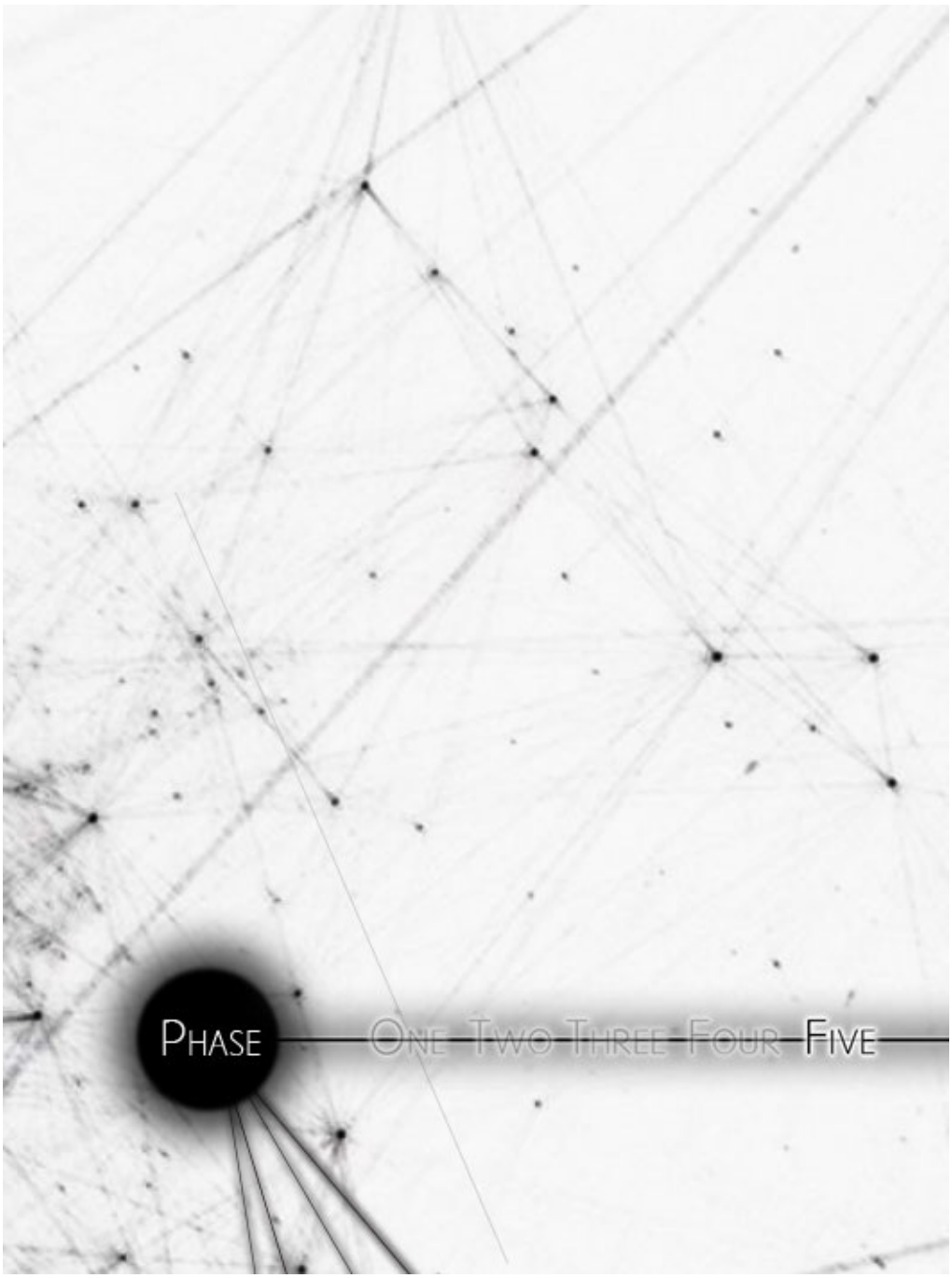
"They hunger, we deliver, they savor. It's a good arrangement."

"You still haven't told me what you want."

"What we've almost got. Europa was a sign. Alpha Centauri was a sign. Those were a show of good faith."

Whatever was behind Attila's eyes, it looked as cold as the room felt.

"There's an old bargain in place. Once they get their fill . . . once they've been fed and strengthened enough on the taste of primal creation . . . they will come and end this useless fucking world, and *really* make something of the ashes."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ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE

For small creatures such as we, the vastness is bearable only through love.
—Carl Sagan

There were so many reasons to not believe her. To think Bianca had found herself a nutty bunch of folks online who spent their lives reinforcing each other's delusions, and she'd bought into the whole package. They gave her answers and they were glad to have her. Craziness, like misery, loves company.

But I believed her anyway.

This truth she'd found for herself made a horribly perfect kind of sense, and it mattered because I was a part of it, too. It promised to explain things going back most of my life. You can wade into the middle of a river, and you don't have to know where the headwaters are, or where it leads, to recognize that the current has taken hold of you.

I was finished trying to fight my way back to dry ground. This had never worked for long.

And now? We'd done what we'd done. No take-backs. Now there was living with it, and trying to get away with it, starting with the inconvenient corpse. Which looked like it was going to come down entirely to me, because soon after Gregg had breathed his last, Bianca fell into such a stupor I had to walk her to the bathroom and get her out of her clothes and wash her off and put her to bed . . .

Where she stayed for the next nineteen hours, dead to this world and any others.

So vulnerable now. All my empathy, all my compassion, belonged not with

Gregg, but with the little girl Bianca had once been, and what she remembered of being what she now called an atavist, connected to some other existence in some other skin—amphibian, reptile, or something that had no correlation in our world. If I could have observed one of her archaic kind, maybe this hibernation would've made perfect sense. Did they get sluggish after their kills, and some ancient part of her remember this?

Or did she only need to shut down and escape for a while?

Periodically I would check on her, sitting on the edge of the bed while stroking the hair back from her face. Was this love? I didn't know, I just figured she would do the same for me.

Sometimes I came in to sit next her holding the bread knife. It could do more than change her marital status. It could end her life altogether, maybe compel mine to start making sense, too. Because lifeforms like her were not only mine to kill, but mine to kill for the sake of my world, right?

While she slept, I would press the tip of the knife to her throat, watching the skin dimple. I wouldn't even have to swing it, plunge it. All I would have to do was wrap both hands around the handle and put my weight behind it and lean forward. Resistance at first—skin is tough—then pop, we're in.

What would happen next, though? That was the question.

You will know it is what you were made for when you do.

You will know why when it happens.

Their blood will ensure your eternity.

Was the sky supposed to open with answers? Would I get a data download to make me see the world through upgraded eyes? It felt more likely that I would sit in the hot spray from her throat, no payoff, just one more episode of being the disposable plaything of a greater power.

In these moments of indecision, I managed the unthinkable, understanding Wade Shavers a little better, curious if it had been like this for him the first time he snuffed a kid. He had to have wrestled with the compulsion for a long time before he went through with it. Once he did, it had to have given his life a whole new level of order.

For the sake of my world, though? Way to oversell, bitches. Fuck you. I like

my world better with Bianca in it.

So it's okay, my friend. You go on and take your nap, and leave the corpse to me.

I gathered up as many Gregg-bits as I could find—nobody trying to get away with murder should leave an ear in the back yard—and saved them for later disposal. I got Gregg stripped and rolled onto a rug, dragged him to the bathroom like a piece of furniture, then wrestled him into the tub. I hit the dining room like a maid—Lysol and bleach, and lots of them—and ran the dishwasher twice.

But once I was back to the 180-pound dude in the tub, he seemed like something that would require a team effort. Not the kind of thing you call in your upstanding big brother for, either.

But I did know someone with potential.

Attila may or may not have disposed of a body in his time—probably not—but he likely possessed the know-how and definitely had the stomach for it. I started to put the call through, then stopped myself, five or six times before setting the phone aside in triumph.

He would have been redundant.

None of this should have been coming to me as easily as it was, and now I knew why. If it's true that we walk away from each relationship having taken something from everyone we ever bonded to, then from Attila I'd already taken everything I needed in order to do what came next.

After I raided the workbench at the front of the garage, I could even say I'd learned from Wade, too. My original mentor. He didn't have a monopoly on tools. My hands could hold them now, and my arms were strong. Gregg himself had furnished whatever was required. Hacksaw, wood saw, hatchet, shears—when he bought them, no way could he have considered that eventually he'd be the one they would be used on.

I raided the upstairs bathroom, too, for another shower curtain to use as a dropcloth. Stripping myself down came last, the final preparation before getting to work.

It seemed sensible to begin with his wrists and ankles—the thinnest joints,

the weakest links. Leave a corpse to rot and disarticulate in the great outdoors, and it'll be the hands and feet that detach first. It's the reason severed feet wash up in shoes after people drown and their bodies go unrecovered. They simply break away, and the buoyant rubber soles keep them bobbing along with the currents.

How did I know this? I'm not sure. It was there when I gave it an opening. Tanner, maybe. This was the sort of thing he would know.

I cut into skin, snipped through ligaments and tendons, hacked past metacarpals . . . and then I had it free, a whole hand, pale and waxy looking, that I could set aside.

With his heart gone still, Gregg's blood merely oozed, so whenever I needed to, I cranked the shower to keep washing it away.

A fleeting idea, thinking ahead—did I really want to rinse it *all* down the drain? So I stopped long enough to pilfer the bathroom cabinets until I turned up a glass bottle of antacid that I could empty and clean. I drizzled some of Gregg's blood into it, then stashed it in the fridge. A save like that could come in handy later.

Ten minutes . . . ? That's about what it took to get past the gag reflex. Only about as long as it took for his arms to shed his hands. By the time his feet came off, he wasn't much more to me than a package of sirloin from the back counter at Whole Foods.

Is this what you had in mind for me all this time, you selfish deities of fate and cruel destinies? Is this what you were so insistent about whispering in my ear? Is this what you wanted to mold me into, for your own self-interests? Well . . . surprise. I'm not doing it to who you wanted me to. Strike me down if you want.

No . . . ? Then piss off and leave me alone.

Removing the arms at the shoulders was a new level of difficulty. I got them going by cutting up though those hairy armpits. Patience, Daphne, patience. Muscle and fat will peel apart, layer by layer—you just have to keep slicing. Neatness doesn't count. He wasn't going on a holiday table, you know.

Sometimes I needed to grab onto his head for the leverage as I cracked his

arms farther in directions and angles than they were meant to tolerate. After I set each arm aside, it was a treat to take the head next, a one-off reward before starting on the legs. Right away I knew why Attila always scoffed at movies where somebody would flick a sword and a head would go flying. It's not that easy. Even before you get anywhere near the cervical spine, the neck is *tough*. Lots of gristle. It doesn't matter how sharp your hacksaw is—you're going to break a nasty sweat.

But that only makes the reward of lifting it up and away by the hair all the sweeter. I set it on the corner of the tub, in the space opened up earlier when I'd packed Magpie's shampoo and kayaking penguin.

No two ways around it, though, taking off somebody's legs at the pelvis is a bitch. I was tempted to see about rustling up some power tools, but feared that would be cheating somehow. Gregg deserved this hands-on level of care. It was the least I could do to hang as tough as his connective tissue was. . . .

Until, finally, it was done. Two hands, two feet. Two arms, two legs. A head, and that big ragged lump at the center. He was so much more portable now. Plus he'd shed a few helpful pounds in blood. After I got some cling wrap around him, he was good for cold storage . . . because transport was going to have to wait.

I managed a few hours of sleep beside Bianca before she roused close to ten the next morning. Still fuzzy around the edges and puffy around the eyes, she wandered out of the bedroom with an air of dread that morphed into bewilderment when reality started deviating from expectations. Dining room, clean. Cutlery, washed. Bathroom, scrubbed, although it was time for new shower curtains anyway.

Might want to hold off on grabbing the milk for now, though.

"You did this?" she said. "You did this for me?"

Knee-jerk response said yes, what are friends for? In my heart, I wasn't sure. Could be Gregg was mine to dismember for myself.

"I hope you're rested," was all I said. "We've got a long day ahead of us."

In those last things she'd had to say to him yesterday, Bianca may have only been winging it, doing her extreme best to make him understand what she was,

but she'd still had some good ideas on how to deal with his component parts. Scattering them far and wide seemed the best option, and Colorado is the kind of state where nobody thinks twice about anyone carrying a heavy gym bag or wearing a backpack.

We ditched Gregg's legs between Denver and halfway to Colorado Springs. His torso we dumped in the grasslands of the eastern plains, for the coyotes. We hoofed deep into the hills of the Front Range, and found a moist, shaded glen where we buried his head with the worms and burrowing beetles. We went in again an hour to the north, and higher in elevation, leaving his arms for whatever might come along to scavenge them first.

By then it was night, and we were down to his hands and feet. I'd been saving those for last, because I knew of a pig farm north of Longmont, and you didn't sneak onto those in broad daylight. It was worth the eye-watering reek to be done with it. I flung these final pieces into the pens for the herd, knowing that soon there would be nothing left of his prints, and their teeth would grind through the bones. It wouldn't spoil the pork, because you'd have to say that Gregg, too, was organic.

So return to the cosmos, Gregg. Disperse and begone.

The last thing we did was take the sack full of balled-up cling wrap that had accumulated throughout the day, smeared with blood and DNA, and like a couple of witches beneath the moon, set it on fire until it melted and shrank into a blackened crisp.

And when I looked into the starfields of the night sky, every light a pinpoint back in time, I could feel the disapproval raining down. I could almost hear the next message they would try to leave on my phone.

You know that one was just for practice, right? Now get your ass in gear, because there's not much time.

It came as an afterthought, as Attila was about to leave him alone in his cell in

the prison in the hell where he'd just watched three people die.

"Could you leave the hatch open?"

"Really?" Over by the doorway, Attila's eyebrows crunched inward. "Why?"

Tanner had never seen him appear suspicious before. He'd had nothing to be suspicious about. Attila had been in control from the start, even when he hadn't looked like it. Everything happened according to his will, at the time of his choosing.

Open the hatch again? One tiny thing he couldn't quite get.

"Because I want to look at it."

Attila grinned. "So the abyss will gaze back into thee? Why, big brother, I do declare. You don't seem the type."

"No atheists in foxholes—you have to have heard that." Tanner gripped one of his bars and gave it a shake. "I wouldn't be the first prisoner to get religion in jail."

"Technically, you're my guest. But point taken, even if I don't believe you for a second. You're the know-your-adversary type, so it's recon for you. But . . . why not?"

As Attila strolled the length of the room, he moved with the grace of big men who had learned to control their mass. Perfect poise, perfect balance, surprisingly light. Until he landed on you. Not a mistake you could make twice.

"I really do wish the right people had gotten hold of you in your tender years," he said as he passed. "You could've been formidable in ways that actually mattered."

"You make it sound like you were made. I would've guessed you were born broken."

"I think you and I have some highly polarized ideas about *broken* and *fixed*. But again, I get your point." He began to turn the hatch's crank wheel. "Mentors spot potential. It's what mentors do. They can't water a seed that isn't there, but they can guide the direction it grows in. 'Give us the child for the first seven years of his life, and we'll give you the man' . . . that was old before the Jesuits got around to stealing it."

With a clunk, the hatch swung open again to reveal its black and pitiless

maw.

“Last chance to change your mind.” Attila hung on the door a moment. “It’s not going to get any warmer, you know.”

“I never thought it would.”

“Then I’ll leave you to each other. And if this is a sneaky way of trying to kill yourself by hypothermia, I’m going to be very disappointed in you. But I could appreciate the irony.”

In a few moments he was gone, and Tanner was alone for the first time since he’d come here. But it didn’t *feel* alone.

With nothing and no one in it, he could now see more of what lay beyond the opening in the wall. More area, more detail. *More.* The longer he stared, the less it appeared like a structure that had been built, and more like something that had been grown. With an underlying order, but with irregularities and imperfections, too, the way a tree might grow.

Like a throat made of coal, he’d thought earlier, but his perception had shifted. The interior reminded him of scales, some overlapping and others askew, like the skin of a carbon fiber serpent turned inside-out. Stare long enough, and he thought he could see it ripple, slowly, as though gulping down the phantom remnants of the treats they’d fed it.

If he could touch it, it might tell him so much more.

How far it extended—that was what he really wanted to know. The sound it had made in the wake of the blast was the sound of a tunnel, a stone age tube worming through bedrock. How such a thing could be here, in the middle of Denver, he couldn’t begin to guess.

He stared until it took on the semblance of a great, blackened eye.

To be exposed to it for long was to feel reality begin to warp around the edges. Maybe it was the cold. Maybe it was his headache, still throbbing from the gas. Maybe the thing was outgassing some vapor of its own and he’d begun to hallucinate. If he relaxed his eyes and let his vision go unfocused, he could feel himself across the room, in the mouth of it . . . and it went on a long, long way. He could hear that in the air, in its ambience. It might extend for blocks. It might extend for miles. It might plunge deep. It might veer east beneath the

trackless plains. It might turn west and burrow under the mountains. It might have been but one among ten thousand.

However far, it had to lead somewhere and terminate—a place inside the earth, but maybe no longer of it. A bubble between dimensions. A wormhole to a space without time, where something vast sat and waited, in a lair where a billion years felt no different than a day. Maybe it had crawled there eons ago. Maybe the planet had amalgamated around it.

The cold gripped and tried to gnaw, but Tanner shook it off. He ignored the sleeping bag on the floor. He'd been cold before, and better for it, for having looked at the cold as a friend, a force to teach you how to kindle your own fire within. When you understood the cold, you better understood yourself, and your fragile place of warmth in a world that could effortlessly extinguish it.

So where did *this* cold come from? The question was everything.

He'd felt its ilk before, inside that toolshed stove. As had Daphne, although with her encounter, it had been severe enough to mark her for life.

Meaning its intensity had faded. But with glacial slowness. Twenty-two years on, after all. So its source had to be of great potency.

A boy's body had been cremated inside that stove. The same little boy Daphne grew obsessed with as a teenager, still dealing with what had happened to her. Not like other boys, she used to report. A boy who remembered astonishing things, and even Wade Shavers hadn't scared him until the end.

Suppose Daphne were here right now, and Francesca and Giang alive to listen as she spoke of him. What might they have said? *One of us, totally. He was another one of us.*

Think, now. Follow this cold to its heart. . . .

The boy had been killed, cut up, burned for expediency. He'd been reduced to ash and dust and fragments. In his departure from the world, he'd left behind a tiny spot as cold as space, a vacuum, a freezing void that tugged at whatever came too close. Twenty-two years later it still pulled leaf smoke from the air.

And here? Here the victims had nearly been vaporized, but for something much more than simple expediency. A sacrifice always had a greater purpose. *They will come and end this useless fucking world, and really make something of*

the ashes.

Attila and his people had done it before, maybe many times. This was the same cold, only more radiant. If he could reach deep enough inside that blackened tunnel, the pull would be the same. All of this was the same, only stronger.

He could believe.

Now keep thinking, keep following . . .

The souls of those who quit the body violently are most pure.

So what did they actually *do* in death, these atavists? They broke down, they disintegrated, they returned, where, to their source? They left a hole. Not just in the hearts of those who loved them, nothing so poetic. They left a hole for real. They punched a hole in the fabric of . . .

Of everything.

Last thing: How did it work—the call, the summons? Their god, one of many, whatever hungry thing it was that lay beyond, did it only hear the blast, or were its senses keener? Did it linger after feeding? Might it feel the vibrations of whatever landed in its blackened gullet? Did it smell dead atavists?

Or did it just smell death?

There were possibilities in that. The greatest lesson the mountains had taught him was to take nothing for granted. Things may not always be as they appear.

Now, finally, Tanner grabbed his sleeping bag. He dug toward the bottom and pulled out the envelope he'd made from a cheeseburger wrapper, and stashed there later that first night, out of sight of his jailers.

Shawn would understand. Shawn would forgive. He might even be amused.

Mostly cartilage, the ear still felt firm, if pale and shriveling around the edges. The basement chill would have slowed its decay, but his warmth in the bag may have hastened it. It had begun to smell of death, and that was all that mattered.

Tanner squeezed against the front of his cage and reached through the bars. All or nothing now. No do-overs, no second shots, so he practiced and visualized. He studied the mechanics of his arm and elbow and wrist. He was a basketball player in the Zone, swishing free throws through a hoop that looked

six feet wide.

By the time he let the ear sail, the hatchway was as big as a tunnel. He couldn't miss.

Next he ripped the zipper from his sleeping bag, then stretched it taut between two of the bars. Everything after that came down to how much he could endure. When you really dug its metal teeth into your skin, back and forth, over and over, it was almost as effective as a saw.

So I'd cleared up my friend's mess and made an even more horrific mess in the process and cleaned that up, too, then we'd made the corpse disappear across a zone of over a thousand square miles. I'd never been more industrious in my life.

For our next trick, we had to scale it up even further. This was more than getting rid of a body. This was about disappearing a life.

And this, too, was mostly on me. Because I was the one with the resources and the freedom to operate in the background while Bianca stuck to the foreground, giving the impression, however modified, of being what she truly was: a woman wronged.

The easy part? Giving Gregg the appearance of having an affair. If you have someone's computer and they're never going to dispute the assertions, you can plant pretty much anything you want to. Set back the date, keep offline so it doesn't re-sync, and you can make things happen right when you need them to.

My contributions to the cause were already timestamped, so all we had to do was tweak the timeframe to fit them. The pictures I took with Attila, especially the ones where you couldn't really see my face. The pictures I took with Val, before he decided the whole thing squicked him out. Who's to say that cock in my mouth wasn't Gregg's? If Bianca said it was his, then by god, it was his.

Bianca stayed behind to lay the groundwork with family and friends—that was no stomach flu this weekend, she just didn't want Magpie to see her parents fighting over something this sordid, so please forgive the lie. We'd loaded the

trunk of his car with a couple of his suitcases that she'd packed, including a box of fresh Trojans, and I hit the road for Las Vegas. Just the place a shitheel husband in the nadir of a premature midlife crisis might plausibly escape to. At over 1,100 miles, it was no quick jaunt, but the distance worked in our favor. It made the marital rift look that much deeper. It made Gregg look that much more pitifully like a cliché. And Vegas was the sort of place where a selfish, abusive prick might run into a bad situation and . . . go poof.

I used one of his credit cards to pay for gas along the way. All the verification the pumps demanded was a zip code. The hardest part was making a drive this long in gloves, to keep from leaving fingerprints. Autumn or not, it got seriously uncomfortable before I even crossed the state line into Utah.

I left in the pre-dawn and drove it straight through, decompressing at rest stops as needed, and got there as evening was turning to full-on night. Deep in the heart of all that was garish and sinful, I detoured a couple blocks off the Strip, until I found a cheap motel that got my vibes going: *This is the place. I don't know why, but I trust the feeling.*

I parked at the back of the lot, where the shadows were deep and the dumpsters were smelly. When I was certain nobody was nearby, I scooted into the passenger seat and took the bottle of blood I'd had Gregg donate while we had the chance a couple nights earlier. I gave it a couple of flicks to leave spatters along the driver's side door and window; shook it to leave a few drops here and there; made two bigger smears along the dash and steering wheel. I took one of the retrieved teeth Bianca had bashed out, bloodied the broken root end, and dropped it in the floorboard.

Outside, I kicked his semi-ransacked wallet under the car, dribbled a few more corpuscles, stashed the keys in my purse, and my work here was done. I didn't care about obvious answers, only leaving behind enough to generate questions that could spin off into multiple scenarios.

Greed would soon take care of the rest.

I was frazzled enough with road nerves that I wasn't one bit in the mood for the Strip, for the neon and glare and noise and the jostling sweaty crush of humanity that acted like it didn't get out much. There was a time it might've

been my kind of place, best experienced through a self-inflicted delirium, but not lately. Now it felt like a wasteland with the stink of desperation boiling out every door and hanging over the streets like a shimmering desert heat haze.

I discretely left a couple of Gregg's credit cards on a table north of Planet Hollywood, and another one outside Bally's, setting them loose into the wild. Don't let me down, guys. You gamblers and grifters, the time of your low-rolling life is at hand. Hotels and hookers and overcooked lobster and all the drinks you can spew into a gutter, until the cards start getting declined. Knock yourselves out. Literally.

Now, finally, I could lose the gloves, and the bottle with the last of Gregg's blood. I could lose his keys, one at a time. Las Vegas generates a staggering amount of garbage—what's a little more here and there?

And just like that, it was time for my long, anticlimactic getaway, starting with an Uber up to the bus station on Main. Next departure for Denver leaves at dawn? Great. Nothing I'd rather do than give my spare charge to panhandlers and marinate for the next few hours in a terminal saturated with the smell of unwashed bodies, weed smoke, and a stale funk like an old motel.

When the time came, the bus dished up more of the same. For the next sixteen hours. It's a special breed of people who flee Las Vegas at 5:30 in the morning.

The last thing I was expecting to discover—here? now?—was that one among them was more special than the others. I hadn't noticed him back at the terminal, so he may have gotten on along the way, during one of the stops in southwest Utah, while I was catching up on sleep.

All I knew was that he was there, near the back, the next time I visited our on-board port-a-potty. He hadn't washed his hair in days and looked to have been losing it for a decade. Both he and the younger woman beside him had the rough, ruddy skin of people who spent a lot of time caught between the sun and the pavement.

I forgot all about peeing.

What is it, with some strangers, that makes you hold a glance like your eyes have been nailed open? What is it that makes you think, hmm, I know so much

more about him than I should? What is it that makes you smile, nothing inviting or reassuring about it, and know it won't be taken wrong, that nobody's suggesting a quickie in the crapper?

I can speak only for myself, but now I know: It's this thing that burned a hole in my cheek once, like a frozen fire, and has been burrowing toward my heart ever since, filling me up as it emptied me out.

It ain't no *namaste* thing, this look of dormant evil I'm holding back.

I recalled a news story from years back. In Canada, I think, on a bus just like this one. Some guy cuts the head off a fellow passenger. He's been on the hunt for aliens and God tells him, dude, look, here's one—better take care of him on the spot.

The difference is, I know I'm right, and I'm in control. You're going to have to break me a lot worse than you did before I become what you celestial monsters want me to be.

"You had a really strange childhood, didn't you," I said to the sunburned man.

He and the girl both looked scared out of their minds. It wasn't every day a Valkyrie came to call. Maybe they remembered the Canadian bus too. After a few moments, he gave me a tiny nod. Strange . . . sure was.

"It couldn't have been easy, nobody else believing the things you knew about yourself, what was normal for you. Nobody else even understanding. But how could they? They didn't have the same frame of reference."

Outside the bus's tinted windows, the desert whizzed past at eighty miles per hour, simmering in the light of a star 93 million miles away. That glare out there had left the surface of the sun more than eight minutes ago. No wonder so many of us wander through our days feeling out of place and out of time.

"Are you going all the way to Denver?" I asked them.

The guy had to look at his partner first, like, do I dare tell this crazy chick the truth? Then he said yes, they were.

"What next?"

"I really don't know. I'll figure it out. I just . . . got it in me that I have to go."

I'd never seen anyone more mystified about what he was doing and why. If I'd been close enough to look those hundreds of kamikaze birds in their little eyes before they plunged toward the rock that remembered being pillars, would they have looked the same?

I didn't bother these fine people again.

Our dawn departure put us climbing Colorado's Western Slope at dusk. As the dark closed in and the air thinned and the peaks rose magnificent around us, it became easier for me to tune out everyone else and pretend it was just me and my window and the blue-black beyond. The stars came out of hiding and no part of anything seemed to matter anymore—neither two days of constant motion, nor the lousy food or choppy sleep or my red itchy eyes. I just wanted a hug, Bianca and me telling each other that everything was going to be all right from now on.

We were somewhere east of Vail when a flash lit the sky, a streak of green-white fire blazing northward and down. In its final nanoseconds of brilliance, I swear it was below the level of the highest distant peaks. There was almost time to wonder how close to home it hit, but the show wasn't over quite yet. It wasn't alone up there. Five or six more streaks followed, smaller and higher and farther to the north, swarming for Wyoming, maybe as far as Montana.

Even though it had been hours since I'd thought of my brother, I thought of him then. Because I was supposed to, and had almost forgotten. Tanner and I had made a sibling pact back when we were young enough to do things like that: *Whenever you see a shooting star, you think of me. Because no matter what we're doing or how far apart we are, we both might've seen it. And it'll be like we're together.*

The magic of that made the rest of the moment a little less horrible.

I glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed, but it was just as I'd thought it would be. They were looking at their phones, or looking at nothing at all.

The atavist in the back, though? Him, I was willing to give the benefit of the doubt, that he'd glanced up at the perfect moment because some subconscious impulse nudged him to.

Ah, but had he seen everything I had? Probably not.

He wasn't screaming his lungs out, was he?

For the next few moments I continued to see the afterimage as if it were burned onto my retinas in the tones of a photographic negative: the night sky flipped to magnesium white over pale gray mountaintops, with a black moon and peppered with ebony stars like holes punched into a canopy, inviting a peek into some greater beyond.

And overlaying it all, on a web from star to star, from world to barren world, were the outlines of vast amorphous forms that seemed to have been caught in the act of writhing in unimaginable torment. It made me think of old drawings of titanic beings in the sky, the ideas behind them hatched by ancient astronomers, and still with us today. We've always had that need to assign order, connecting this group of stars into a lion, that group into a hunter, these others into a bull and a dog and a bear.

What I saw wasn't nearly so recognizable. They were the anatomies that might result if some primeval form of life had billions of years to wander and never grew weary of growing, with nothing to limit it, nothing to guide it but madness and whims. They stretched across the dome of the night like monstrous sea anemones.

My life had never made much sense to me, not after I was six. But sometimes, like the connect-the-dots lines drawn between stars, features linked up and patterns formed and I could catch a glimpse of a hidden order, striving to guide me toward some directed end.

Whatever dark matter really is—the stuff that physicists say makes up 27% of the universe—nobody was supposed to have ever seen it directly.

So who's to say that, for a moment, I hadn't just done that very thing.

If it's out there, it's got to make *something*.

A knife would have left a cleaner wound.

But that wasn’t what he needed. Tanner wanted blood, and this one was a bleeder, as much damage as he’d been able to inflict on himself and still function. Nerve impairment would have been taking things too far.

The sleeping bag’s zipper had chewed a long gash, ragged and raw, in the meaty heel of his left hand. After that it was a race against time and vasoconstriction. He bled as freely as he could, while he could. Tanner flicked his hand up and down to sling a spattered trail between the hatch and the bottom of his cage. When the flow ebbed, he squeezed and dug and drizzled some more.

As he waited to see what would happen, he bound the wound with strips of flannel ripped from the bag’s lining. If nothing else, there was satisfaction in tearing it apart. Since his first night here, he’d wondered who had used this bag before him. How many days and nights had they spent cocooning themselves against the chill, praying to see the world again, until they died seeing only the very worst of it?

His decision had been simple, and calm: Now that he knew what they did here, he refused to be their leverage, nobody’s tool to wield control over Daphne. Liberating, really. Once you saw yourself as expendable, everything was on the table.

His hand throbbed and the flesh burned. He sat on the floor with his arm trailing out of the cage. If he could’ve hastened a stinking case of gangrene, he might have tried that, too. *Smell that? Come and get me.*

This would work or it wouldn’t.

He could willingly lose blood or tacitly forfeit his soul.

He could die now or die later.

The possibilities were legion.

Was he better attuned to it now—was that how he knew? Or was it because now there were no distractions? No grenades, no trauma, no team of killers or bodies blown to pulp. It was just him and their god now, with his focus undivided.

Gods, he’d always heard, came in wheels of light and waves of thunder. What did it say about this one, that it slithered in stealth behind a creeping miasma of dread? That it was a thing that could smell a decaying ear and had

nothing better to do than investigate? He didn't need to touch it to feel it. The ambience it pushed ahead of itself was much the same as it had been around Val, only denser—it was more than spirit now, it was form—repellant and unnatural, like drinking oil when you wanted water.

But with a good enough reason, you could get used to anything.

Beyond the hatchway, the chamber's interior pulsed with a slow, peristaltic ripple. It dimmed as if something unseen had gathered to steal the light. For a moment, the last of Shawn appeared to move on its own. His ear scooted and turned, then shrank and disappeared, as if broken down and absorbed.

Filaments and tendrils, feelers and stalks—now he saw them, now he didn't. His eyes couldn't be that unreliable. Eyes only admitted light. The brain did the rest, and there were other ways in, other senses. Maybe that explained it.

Their god wavered in the air on the lip of its tunnel. It knew the blood was there. Then it shot out and plunged to the floor with an audible slap.

"That's right," he told it. "I'm over here."

If it heard him, it gave no sign. Maybe it was deaf to the frequencies of a human voice. Maybe it couldn't hear at all, and only perceived the smells of death and life. For all he knew, this was a single appendage extruded by an entity far away, only ever as long as it needed to be.

It siphoned the blood and inched forward for more, colorless on its own, he was beginning to realize, but chameleonic, now the gray of the cement floor and blushing with hemoglobin.

Just inches away now, it was a thing of wonder. Tanner saw in it many shapes, familiar forms it was *almost* like. It was a giant millipede from a rain forest floor. It was a spiny crustacean from a coral reef. It was a deep-sea eel from an abyss beyond sunlight, that aspired to grasp and crawl.

It was none of those things, and sipped at his sacrifice, humble though it may have been.

Attila's own words had brought him to this—that in the canyon the other day, some facet of his character or physiology may have helped shield him from harm by these beings. But to not let it go to his head. Let it go there anyway. Put this notion to its most unforgiving test.

When he seized it, the thing was slow to react, sluggish, and why not—if it was as great as Attila said, he was no more than a mite to it. The sensation was like grasping a cable encased in January ice. It entered him like the cold, too, first enveloping, then permeating. It wasn't a jolt, nothing like electricity. It was vertigo and irreconcilable contradictions. This entity was not from here. This entity had always been here.

Senses swamped, he couldn't see, couldn't hear. He had made a mistake. He had always made this mistake.

He'd never left the floor but felt slammed to it anyway. His bones were gone, his thoughts no longer his own. There was someone named Tanner, and there were entities revered and feared as gods, and he was somewhere in between. He glimpsed the tenor of its thoughts, tasted the source of its hunger, grasped at the roots of its terror. He stretched for miles. He stretched for light-years.

Yet the center held.

And then . . .

Equilibrium.

He floated. In a heap on the floor, crushed into the concrete, he floated. Yet he was not Val, helpless and fumbling. It didn't have him; he had it, and needed only to remember what to do with it. He clawed back through time and across space. Minutes ago, eons ago, his desperation had been so clear.

His fingers curled, his hands could clutch again, his arms could push upright.

When he knew he could trust his eyes, he looped the zipper around the top of the tendril and snapped it tight as a garrote, serrated edges and all. A lump the size of a tongue, it crackled apart like nothing he had ever cut, then grew tougher, more fibrous, the deeper he sawed. But he was even stronger than he was determined. If their god was aware it had been reduced, it seemed not to care. It had fed on him, so turnabout was only fair, and it had so much more to spare than he did. When he let it go, it slithered back in withdrawal, perhaps because it was already bored with him.

As for what was left . . . chameleonic, still. Now it was the color of his mangled hand.

Quick, now, before thought could overrule impulse. This tradition of eating a

piece of one's god was nearly as old as teeth.

He reeled, then remembered he had feet and legs, and used them. His balance worked itself out on the way up, as he stood with all the defiance of the first ape that had ever tried to grasp the moon. He was primal and evolved, savage and divine, ravenous and fulfilled. He didn't know how long it would last, or if he would ever work right again. But for now he had hands, and before them steel seemed so fragile. He would figure out the rest on the other side of the cage.

Calm yourself, new guy. You aren't going to bend bars.

Yeah? Tell them that.

What his hands could do in this moment wasn't even his greatest strength.

No, his greatest strength was knowledge. Because there was someone named Tanner, and there were entities revered and feared as gods, and once again he knew the difference.

They were nothing like their servants believed them to be.

There were two problems going forward, as I saw it.

After doing the things I'd done, and what Bianca and I had done together, how was I supposed to go back to living a normal life?

Also, by what delusional set of standards could I call my life normal, anyway?

I didn't even want it back. Again. Assuming we didn't have a go-directly-to-jail card ahead of us, what I liked now was life as it was reformulating under Bianca's roof. This was an arrangement I'd never tried, and it worked.

I didn't think of the house as a crime scene. I found it easy to not dwell on what I'd done in the bathroom, what Bianca had done in the dining room. Even though we were still waiting for the Las Vegas fallout to hit, to me, the place felt . . . cleansed. There were no ghosts. Now there was potential again. There was a lively soon-to-be-five-year-old who periodically wondered where her daddy was, but seemed okay without him. Plus she had the best aunt ever

moving in, so how cool was that?

Still, there were pieces of the past I needed to retrieve, loose ends to tie off. There were only so many days in a row I could raid Bianca's closet, trying to find clothes of hers that would fit me, too. She and I were comprised of roughly the same amount of raw material, just in different form factors.

Which was how I found myself back at the Broomfield house I'd shared with Val, for the first time in . . . holy shit, eight days. I was cautiously optimistic that this might even go easy. He hadn't tried calling me since Monday morning, while I was on the road to Vegas, which was potentially a good sign that he was as over me as I was over him.

Now it was a Sunday afternoon, the surest bet to catch him home, and his car was in the garage, so he should've been there. Yet . . . no Val. I walked into a house that was strangely silent, with a palpable feeling of disruption in the air. It seemed too open, too vacant, too unlived-in, and not just because of our scarcity of furnishings. It was more fundamental than that.

The place felt dead, as if it hadn't heard a heartbeat in a while. Which made my own quicken a few BPMs.

I caught a hint of a bad smell, too, wafting up from below, like something from the meat counter had spoiled. Not the meat itself—it wasn't that strong. More like the bloody styrofoam tray the meat had come on. I followed my nose until I stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking across the room Val wanted to turn into a gym, and only got as far as bringing in that third-hand treadmill.

I couldn't imagine any good scenarios that would end with this smell, and a big square cut out of the carpet. Plus curtain ties dangling from the treadmill's handrails, like somebody had been playing a game of Suzy Homemaker Bondage Edition.

What the fuck, Val? Seriously, what's up with this?

When the front door opened and closed upstairs, I knew it wasn't him. It didn't sound like him. I'd never even realized that Val-through-the-door had a signature sound, or that I was attuned to it. But he did, and I was. Such a couples thing, and I totally hadn't realized it. And I feared for him, and missed him, in ways I never knew I could.

A woman stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at me. Black slacks, snug black pullover sweater, black boots built for function, not for style. I'd never seen her before. Sleek black hair, not short, not long. Gray eyes, were they? Sure, for variety. Wait, yes, I had too seen her.

"You're one of Attila's friends, aren't you," I said. "Evvie, is that right?"

She peaked an eyebrow, a thick eyebrow at that. Not much into plucking, was Evvie. "I would've thought you were too drunk to remember."

So many comebacks, so little time. So many more important matters to tend to. "What are you doing here? Did you follow me here?"

"I've been waiting, actually. Sometimes I stay in the car, sometimes I drive off and do something to kill the boredom, and come back later and hope for the best." Thin lips, too. She had the irkiest little sneer. "I went to a blow-out this morning that was interesting."

Waiting for me. For days? Sounded like it. Amazing. Unnerving and creepy, but amazing. From hot mess to hot commodity.

"Attila put you up to this," I said. "And you're okay with that."

She just looked at me. Of course she was okay with it. How dare I ever doubt.

"I'm coming down there," Evvie said. "I have something I want to show you. You won't be able to make it out from this far. Okay?"

A million things can go through your mind in the time it takes someone to descend six steps. Attila hadn't put her up to this after all. She wanted into his life but he was still fixated on me and she couldn't tolerate that and it would be so much easier for her if I were dead. Good luck, bitch. Crazier humans than you have tried.

Hand in cardigan pocket. Keys in fist, the way they teach you in self-defense classes. Welcome to my humble abode.

She didn't seem fazed by the smell. She didn't give the missing chunk of carpet more than a passing glance. Right then I knew: These people understood more about my absentee life than I did right now.

"Val's not okay, is he?" From her blasé face, I read everything but how and why. "What happened to him?"

“You should really take that up with Attila.”

“You’re his representative, I’m taking it up with you.”

“Nobody did anything to Val, if that’s what you’re wondering. Nobody hurt him, nobody even touched him.”

She stepped closer. That thing you have to tell guys—*hey, my eyes are up here* . . . ? It was like that with Evvie now, only she wasn’t fixated on my chest. Higher up. She was stuck at my cheek. Couldn’t tear her gaze from that spot on my cheek, and oh my god, who are these people, really?

“If anything,” she said, “it was you.”

And that peevish look. Like Evvie knew she wasn’t supposed to harm one hair on my head, but she had a little knife to stick me with anyway, and she was determined to use it.

“What happened was because of you. You exposed him to it. You got him noticed and made him vulnerable. Just from being around you. And he was weak enough, and empty enough, to let it happen. He must’ve been a hollow waiting to be filled.” She tilted her head, like I was beyond comprehension. “How do you go from a man like Attila to someone like that?”

“What *happened* to him?”

“You know how when you flip on a light and the bulb can’t take it anymore?” She lifted a fist, then sprang her fingers apart, pfft. “But there’s that instant right before the filament goes, when it burns so bright? That’s what happened to him. Val was the bulb and a god was the electricity. He couldn’t handle the surge. Not many people can.”

Signs on my phone, signs in the sky. “A god.”

“It’s complicated.”

If I were on Facebook at the moment, how would I have put it? *That feeling when a bunch of random escalating weirdness throughout your life finally comes together and starts making a horrible kind of sense.*

Stop vaguebooking, Daphne!

Oh, just various things Attila said. “If you thought you had to kill someone to reach the fullest expression of who you are, would you do it?” The way he always seemed to be trying to steer me toward a worldview I found untenable.

The strangest, most persistent phone stalker ever. Finding Bianca. And the guy on that eastbound bus out of Vegas. Plus a few others I'd spotted who sparked the same sense of recognition, so I was getting sharper at it. Sparing Bianca, despite a nagging sense that something didn't want me to. The subject heading on that atavist forum that Bianca had left open in her browser: We are being stalked and killed.

There's no emoji for all that.

"I think I'm finally getting clear on his real interest in me."

"That's a start. That's all anybody wants here."

Look how reasonable she was being. We're all so reasonable here. Reasonable beings in an unreasonable universe. Evvie was checking me out, and I was checking her out, and where should we go from here?

She had a sharp eye, give her that, homing in on the cardigan I was wearing —loose across the shoulders and not long enough in the sleeves. Not my size. Bianca dimensions. A guy would never have noticed that. Put it together with my eight-day absence, and who knows, maybe a whiff coming off me, and Evvie had my number.

"You've . . . been with one of them, haven't you?"

"You can't have her."

With a sigh, the strain on Evvie's patience began to show. "What's wrong with you? You're like the tiger in those clips from the zoos where they've dropped a goat into the enclosure, and instead of eating the goat, the stupid tiger makes friends with it. That's not the way any of this is supposed to work."

"Says who?"

"Umm . . . natural law?"

I am woman, hear me scoff. "You sound just like Attila. Is he rubbing off, or are you fucking him now?"

"Somebody needs to. That's a lot of cock to go to waste."

But now she was here, with me, and I was the one she had eyes for. Not all of me, just my cheek. Not my cheek, but the spot on it that had never quite blended with the rest. Because there was a claim on it.

"What's it like?" She sounded different now, starstruck. "I've always wanted

to know.”

“It’s like . . . erosion. Like the wind blowing through a little chink in a wall, and I’m on the warm side of it, but the wind never stops. It keeps stealing the warmth and the crack is only going to get bigger.”

My deceptively deepest scar. But what was it now, if not my power over her?

“Do you want to touch it?”

Evvie wasn’t the type to show it, but nothing could have made her happier. She was like Attila that way. She didn’t do happy. But she could do thrilled and nervous and envious. I bet she never realized the tip of her tongue slid across to wet her lips.

At that first contact of her fingertips on my cheek, she gave a little shudder, a shimmy of fearsome ecstasy. Something flowed between us—a gust of cold, a dynamic of loss and emptiness. It was the whoosh of the air going out of the world. Once upon a time, I hadn’t merely gazed into the abyss—we’d gone dancing cheek-to-cheek. I was already being pried open at the moment, so who knows how much got in. Now it gazed back through me and its vision was getting keener.

Evvie closed her eyes at the pitiless magnitude of what she’d found. Was the moment all she’d hoped for? It surely was, but she hated it, too, loathing the very idea that such an unworthy vessel as me was the conduit for something she thought she revered so much. It should’ve been her.

You sick bitch, I thought, and even now, all these hours later, I’m not sure which of us I meant, or who deserved it more.

She stepped back to get herself together, as if she’d been flicking the bean under a table. “You really should come with me.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Just a quick sit-down to hear some things out. A half-hour, that’s all.”

“No consideration that maybe I have other plans? I don’t want to.”

I could read it all over her face, Plan B coming up, and she was savoring the moment. “Attila thought you might not. So, that thing I said I want to show you . . .”

She pulled out her phone, poked and swiped, and showed me the screen.

Tanner. Oh god . . . Tanner. Always there for me, the most dependable thing in my life. The *only* dependable thing, if you don't count chaos and consequences. A guy made for mountains and canyons and open skies, this cage would kill him. He would think he could beat it, staying inside as long as it took, but it would drain the life from him. And I had put him there. Wherever it was, I had shoved him inside.

"Okay." I nodded. "You win. I'm officially persuaded. Hooray for you."

She tucked her phone away, as pleased with herself as any middling corporate minion who'd stuck a knife in someone's back to slither another rung up a ladder.

"Does Attila still live in the same place?"

"Yes," she said, the last thing she ever would.

I slipped my hand from the cardigan and punched her in the throat with my spiky fistful of keys. Once, twice, before Evvie got her hands up around her neck to clutch at her life. Her eyes went wide and she was still trying to process what had happened as she staggered backward, losing her balance a couple steps from the wall. She bounced off it on the way down, smacking the back of her head hard enough that she let go of her throat. She spewed blood from at least three holes, choking on it at the same time as she choked from trying to breathe with a mangled larynx. Sucks to be you, I guess.

While she twitched, I took her phone away, in case she hung in there long enough to make a call and Attila was able to translate gargling.

"I already know the way there," I told her, and really hoped she heard me. "What do I need you for?"

If there were such entities as ghosts, and those of Giang and Francesca were anywhere around, they had to be laughing. They'd been right the first time. *You see how things are now, new guy? Maybe you got lucky with the cage. But you weren't going to tear down walls or rip a bunker door from its hinges the other*

night, and you still aren't today.

The failure made him feel human again, not the most welcome feeling in the world right now. God and mortal, he was the worst of both, out of his cage but still in his prison. What he'd managed with the bars was the matinee act of a circus strongman. It didn't scale, didn't transfer.

When it became clear the outer door had no weak spots he was capable of exploiting, Tanner fell back in retreat. Pathetic—returning to the same spot he'd spent days hoping to get out of. It was the only place down here he was comfortable. He knew then why so many ex-cons didn't stay ex for long. After a point, you stick with what you know.

He would have to wait. One of them, probably Attila, would be back down this evening with food. The crucial variable was what condition he would be in by then, if he would still be up to wreaking the kind of havoc it was going to take to get away.

He wasn't right. He was himself, and then again, he wasn't. He had a passenger within, along for the ride. After that initial surge of power, his body knew it was wrong and tried the usual measures to shake it off. He hit the slop bucket from both ends. He ricocheted between fever and chills.

Perceptions, too, became a clash of consciousness, as he swung between frequencies at both ends of the dial. One moment he was in the cage and in the moment, huddled atop the shreds of his sleeping bag, senses so acute he could count the grains in the concrete floor. The next he was weightless in some outer dark, hurtling through canyons of vertigo with no regard for time. He scaled mountains and found them to be bones. He crushed rocks and found them to be moons.

He longed to die. He longed to live. He longed to die to live again in some smarter version of this life. He yearned for it, prayed for it, then wept a tsunami when he realized he was the very god he was praying to, and that it was even more helpless than he was.

He had to live, though . . . if only long enough to share what he'd learned from looking through such an ancient set of eyes. Attila, Desmond, Gregor, Evvie . . . secrets of the universe, kids. Nothing would hurt them more.

He elbowed over to the slop bucket and fished out pieces of what he'd sicked up earlier, then washed them off with water from his jug. It had to be done now, because he didn't trust himself to remember it later. That they were still chameleonic even after being severed, swallowed, and half-digested was almost enough to start him laughing and never stop.

But the feeling didn't last, and when a tickle in his head made him sneeze, and it came out in strings of blood, he figured neither would he.

Appalling, how good I was getting at this death thing. Being around it. Letting it happen. Cleaning it up. Now bringing it on. It wasn't anything I felt proud of, any more than I felt guilty for anything in particular. It just *was*. Mostly I wondered how it had come to this, and maybe felt guilty about not feeling guiltier. And sad, too, because I'd been raised to be better than this. I'd been raised the same way Tanner had, and look how he turned out.

Dragged into human bondage by his crazy sister.

I made the drive down to Denver, to Attila's, to come to terms with whatever plans he had for me, even though all I wanted was to be left alone. Why did that have to be so hard? I'm not your tool. I'm not your toy. I'm not your fixer-upper to save or the mirror in which you want to see yourself. I wasn't made to fit your box, your arm; to fill your emptiness, your crematory wood stove.

But that final drive to Attila's . . . ? It was part of the new pattern, fitting alongside that connection I felt with Bianca, that moment with the skeevy guy on our Greyhound bus. I was either legitimately insane now, or privy to a hidden exodus going on beneath the surface of daily life. Atavists everywhere. I spotted them in traffic, on the other side of the center line. I saw them on corners, waiting for the crosswalk light to change. I caught them hoofing it or hitchhiking.

This one, who looked like somebody's least favorite elderly aunt. That one, the guy I would bet on being a construction worker who pounded down a nightly

twelve-pack. Her too, the one who graduated most likely to wind up grinding a stripper pole. Atavists all. They might as well have had tongues of flame flickering above their heads, while their faces seemed to be asking what am I doing, where am I going, why am I in this life?

Most of which I was trying to sort out for myself, too, but as for where they were going, every last one of them appeared to be heading northwest, toward the mountains. Their consistency in this was . . . telling.

Something was about to happen.

So, asses and elbows, people. Keep it moving. I used to fuck a guy who wants you dead.

When I returned to him, Attila had to buzz me in through the door, because even though I'd never deleted the key from my keyring—all the better to punch you with, Evvie—it didn't fit the lock anymore. Attila wanted me back, all right, just not as much as he wanted to maintain security.

It's a surreal moment, stepping back into a place you once lived. The longer you've been gone, the stronger the barrier knitted from your absence. Attila hadn't changed a thing in that big, open space above the flower shop, and every bit of it resented me for bailing just as much as he did.

He met me at the top of the stairs. In the background, where the furniture was grouped, he had company. The guy with the shaved head and black beard had a hazy familiarity. The haze would've been all mine, whenever we'd met. I had a flashback of Evvie hanging on his shoulder and wiggling her tongue in his ear. The old man . . . I had no recollection of him at all. He looked like the grandpa you always wanted, but turned pervy, one face for your parents, another for when he got you alone.

God, I bet his hands were cold.

No sign of Tanner, but it was a big building.

"You're an asshole," I said to Attila. "I knew that, I just didn't know how much."

"You could've asked. I would've told you."

He made two of me. Facing each other for the first time in eight months, I was acutely aware of this. He hadn't lost the ability to give me that woozy

feeling. To be this close was to physically remember how he could crush me, smother me, overwhelm me, right up to the precipice of pain. His heavy face was a carnivore's. Every lock of long black hair was a sisal whip that flogged my skin as he rode me. Whatever was behind his eyes was beyond reaching, and I guess that was as much a draw as the rest, because it meant I didn't have to try.

"Nothing happens, nothing gets discussed, until I see my brother and know he's okay."

I sounded way tougher than I felt. That was easy when I knew Attila wouldn't hurt me directly, he'd only hurt me by proxy.

"There should be two of you here and there's only one. Where's Evvie?"

I pulled out her phone and showed him the screen, playing out the last thirteen seconds of Evvie's life. I'd already made sure the volume was up high. There was something about her desperate hacking choke being overdriven through a crappy little speaker that made it sound especially painful.

Attila didn't flinch, only stared at the screen. First at the video, then, when it was over, at the preview frame. I'd never gotten a "Jesus fucking Christ" out of him before, let alone two in a row, so that was a big win for me.

The neckbeard in the background was up on his feet now, laser focused in his attention. He yelped Attila's name a couple times, while the creepy granddad looked back and forth with a simpering smile: *Ooo, this should be delicious.*

"Where's Evvie?" The neckbeard's voice cranked high under tension. "What's on the phone? *What's on that fucking phone?*"

Attila locked eyes with me and whispered, "You did this?"

Look at you, Mister Cognitive Dissonance all of a sudden, caught between being proud of my initiative and dismayed by my choice of problem to solve. How *will* you resolve that internal conflict?

"Don't you remember? You laid down the challenge. If I had to kill someone to reach the fullest expression of who I am, would I do it?"

"Let's not go pulling things out of context."

"Oh, so now you decide you don't like the answer. Maybe you should've left the question a little less open-ended, you think?"

The neckbeard was wading forward. More dissonance. He hated me but

feared Attila. He knew what was on that phone. He knew what he'd heard. I bet he'd heard that ghastly sound before. I bet he'd reveled in it, his reward for a job well done.

Attila held out a halt-hand toward him. "Gregor? Stay where you are."

Gregor, right. I looked at him as he obeyed and couldn't resist: "Good doggie."

I'd never seen a more wounded, conflicted face in my life. Gregor was a man in total overload. His arms curled up, shaking, as though his hands had to do *something*, then he whirled around and stomped off for the arched doorway in the back corner.

Attila shouted his name. He hardly ever raised his voice because he didn't have to. But when he did? Oh god. It was a terrifying sound to behold, thunder resonating from the depths of that big torso, and so effective Gregor might as well have been on a leash. When he spun around again, his anguish had dragged him to the point of tears.

"I know where you're going. I know what's on your mind," Attila said.

I was afraid I did, too. I remembered a back utility hall that terminated in a door that was always locked. No access, no admittance. It made sense at the time. Now I was starting to suspect it was a threshold meant to be crossed only by initiates.

"You're going to want to rethink that," Attila warned. "That's not a consequence-free zone you're headed into. Are you hearing me?"

Gregor stammered a few attempted thoughts, none of which got far. The creepy grandfather was on the edge of his seat. He had everything he needed except popcorn.

Attila blasted me with a scowl, still unable to believe the position I'd put him in and trying to channel his inner Solomon, how to cut this particular baby in two.

I'm so sorry, Tanner. Whatever happens next, I'm sorry. Maybe I didn't think this through. It's happened before, you know that better than anyone.

And of all the times for Creepy Granddad to get a phone call. His expression of mean delight soured. Sucks to be you, too, huh? Sucks to be everybody today.

“If you need to cause some pain, then cause some pain. I get that. You’re owed that much,” Attila told Gregor, then sent another seething glance my way. “You’re owed more. But no permanent damage. I mean it. Leave him intact. Mostly.”

The clash of the door roused him, called him back. Tanner knew what it was when he heard it, and that it meant something important. He recognized the sound of footsteps and fury. He understood a look of murder on a face, and a moment later had reassembled enough of himself to know who the face belonged to. Gregor. Wild eyes, crazed and pained, lips skinned back from his teeth in a predatory wail—Tanner couldn’t imagine what had made him snap, but trusted it was real. No explanation, just Gregor jabbing down at him through the bars with the same stout length of wood they used for prisoner transport. Connecting, too.

As abruptly as he had attacked, Gregor froze, his face wiping blank and stupid. He’d only now noticed the gap bent into the bars around the side of the cage. Nothing stopped an angry man like the sight of something that should not, could not, be.

Tanner had hold of him before he even knew he was moving. He seized Gregor by the arm and ripped the cudgel from his hand. Ripped two fingers from their sockets and wrenched the hand free of the forearm so it flopped at the wrist like a glove.

He worked his way up the arm while Gregor screeched and tried to backpedal away, and pulled Tanner up with him. Tanner yanked him back against the cage so hard the whole structure rattled, and something else cracked —the elbow, the ulna, he didn’t care, it was all coming apart. He homed in on the beard and that open mouth gobbling in the middle, then had Gregor by the jaw, fingers curling over the teeth and thumb under the chin. He tugged down and the entire mandible popped at the hinges, then yanked his arm back again and again, battering Gregor’s head into the bars until his skull started to crumple

around the edges of his eye sockets. Tanner hauled back once more and the hairy jaw was his and his alone, as Gregor dropped to the floor and didn't move—just his eyes still blinking and his tongue lolling wet and slick from the cavity of his gullet.

Tanner was out of the cage again and halfway to the open door before he felt the blood running down his arm and realized it wasn't Gregor's. He pushed up his sleeve to check himself from elbow to wrist, and . . .

And, oh, gods have mercy.

Down the length of the outside of his arm, the skin looked like the surface of an old radiator hose, lined with splits and cracks. A dozen lipless mouths, left in the wake of the strain. So that's how it was going to be? He'd proved more durable than Val, but not durable enough.

He pulled his sleeve back into place.

He didn't look down. He didn't look back.

There was only ahead, only up, only now.

As Gregor stormed off to claim his due, I found I could pray again—prayers to the void, or maybe that was where they went automatically, along with a lifetime of missing socks. The next worst thing was having Attila's full attention now.

"Pottery Barn rules," he said. "You break it, you buy it. What's about to go on downstairs, that's your price."

In hindsight, no, it wasn't worth it. Still . . . I'd mindfucked Attila in a way I didn't think anyone else ever had.

He seized me by the wrist. He wasn't gentle. But then, when was he, ever?

"You thought you were going to let it happen without you? No, you don't skate this time, you get to watch. You watch your brother and I'll watch Gregor. If I don't, he's going to forget everything we just covered up here and not know when to stop."

Now it was Creepy Granddad who was on his feet, phone still in his hand.

This time I couldn’t read him at all. I didn’t have the stomach for it.

“You need to see this,” he said.

“Not a good time.”

“You think I’m blind to the fact you believe you have something more important to do?” Testy old fuck, too, wasn’t he? “You need to see this now.”

Attila flashed one last glare that was supposed to nail me to the floor until I had permission to move again. I sidled off out of pure spite, but still in a good position to side-eye and eavesdrop as they huddled over the phone. Attila went mute. As omens go, this one seemed particularly portentous.

“Is that real?” he finally said.

“It’s verified. Oh yes.”

“It doesn’t *look* real.”

“What’s it supposed to look like? It’s nothing human eyes have ever seen.”

While Creepy Granddad beamed with what looked like the realization of a life’s ambition, Attila stuttered with the quiet, choppy laughter of pure disbelief. A lottery player looking at a winning ticket, been playing his entire life and still can’t wrap his head around that much money now that he’s suffocating in it.

“I wonder if that’s what it looked like on Europa,” he said.

And oh. My. God. Somebody’s god, anyway. This was really happening. Here. Now. To us. A wave swept through me, maybe through the world, and left me outside of everything, floating above the floor, watching myself.

“Where is this?” Attila asked.

“Chamonix. The French Alps.”

It took me a moment, then I knew it: the site of another rain of birds I’d gone looking for.

“Is it happening anywhere else?”

“They’re still looking.”

“Try Uluru,” I said.

They glanced up with a double-barreled look of annoyance. Didn’t know my role, I guess.

“Ayers Rock . . . ?” Colonialist swine. “And Quebec, too. Pont-Rouge, I think was the place.”

They hunched over the phone again and gabbled worse than a couple of old ladies snooping on the neighbors. Before long, they must have struck gold. Creepy Granddad looked ready to spooge with euphoria, but Attila was harder to figure. He wanted to believe; just not all of him.

Because sometimes belief meant surrender.

From his place on the couch, Attila locked onto me with a look I'd never seen from him. Admiration. He'd never looked at me with admiration before. Or regret. But here they were, bundled into a single, painful package. Oh, the times we could've had . . . and now it's too far gone.

He grinned, and his tone was so unlike him: "Somebody's been doing some extracurricular studying."

Much like while I'd been driving along with Magpie, the planets aligned long enough to open a window revealing an alternate future I could almost touch. Outside of time, for no longer than a match flare, I saw a man I could've loved. I saw someone else he could've been. And I saw, reflected back, who I might have been with him. A whole life you never lived can flash before your eyes in a moment.

But the alignment passed, the window closed, and we were back to who we were all along, stuck with our old selves again.

Sucks to be me, huh?

But right then, maybe I wouldn't have changed a thing anyway.

It's not every day somebody like me sees her half-assed, kneejerk prayer get answered on speed dial. I must've been doing something right.

Because here he was, up from below, and right now only the two of us knew it: Tanner. My brother. My steadfast, beautiful brother, the best man I'd ever known. Who by now must have been so godawful tired of this routine of ours, but never showed it, because he only ever showed me what love was really supposed to look like.

Even if, sometimes, love could be painful. Love could get bloody.

Oh, Tanner, what have they done to you?

What have you done to yourself?

Four flights of stairs, that's all it was, from the basement to the second floor, yet he was wheezing. It was supposed to take so much more than that to make his lungs feel regret. That was how he knew: He'd be doing the impossible to walk out of here on his own two feet. More like somebody would have to scrape up whatever was left of him into a plastic tub and store him next to Val.

When he stepped from the back hall into the loft, Tanner was ready for murder in the first degree. Killing didn't come more premeditated than this. Their backs were to him. They would be dead before they knew what hit them.

But then he saw her, and stopped.

For a moment he thought he must've been crying, because he felt the flow of something warm and wet, until he realized the skin had split between his eyes.

Her name was Daphne and he loved her on sight, all over again. He'd killed her so long ago, killed them both, whoever they'd been meant to be. Still, they had endured. In transmuted forms, they had endured.

At some point, he could finally admit, she'd begun to seem less like a sister and more like some quarry he'd had to catch-and-release, time and again, over a decade. Yet he'd never seen her looking so sure of herself as she was now, in this antechamber of hell. It was possible he'd done all this for nothing, and she could have handled herself fine without him.

But then, who would he have been without her?

On the sofa, Attila and Desmond couldn't miss that she was staring at something beyond them. When they turned, he at least had that much surprise on them. No, he wasn't Gregor. But here was a *piece* of Gregor. Tanner gave it a toss and Desmond caught it before he knew what it was—a horseshoe of teeth and bone, tattered flesh and frayed ligaments, wrapped in a bloody black thicket of beard. With a startled yelp, Desmond juggled and fumbled it to the floor.

Attila wasn't stupid and he wasn't slow. Something was out-of-control wrong in ways beyond what he could pinpoint. A man his size? The other night, two against one, maybe he'd needed the battle-axes. One on one wouldn't be

much of a contest.

He went for his axes anyway.

Attila was closer, but Tanner still beat him to the wall where both pairs hung mounted. His speed didn't come without a price, a muscle in one calf tearing as he sprinted. He stumbled into the wall and righted himself just before Attila was on him. When he front-kicked outward and caught Attila's hip, it brought agony to them both. The impact compressed Tanner's knee and something gave with a pop as Attila spun and slipped on the floor.

Tanner had an axe in each hand by the time Attila bulldozed back in. Not the pair he'd used on Shawn, but the other, bigger ones, with crescent heads and wicked back-spikes as slim and sharp as raven's beaks. Attila's instincts were good, even under pressure: Fight the man, don't tussle for the weapon. Attila tried to bowl him over, tie him up, anything to neutralize his swing and reach. He grappled onto Tanner's shoulders but looked surprised to lose his grip. Even Tanner didn't know why at first, barely feeling it when, under his shirt, a slab of skin sloughed away from the muscle.

Attila dodged a swing then lunged in, dropping low and wrapping both arms around Tanner's waist. He trapped the left arm while it was down, pinning it to Tanner's side, but missed the right. He reared up again, and in an instant Tanner's shoes were three feet off the floor. A bodyslam was coming, and that would end it for him. He whipped the free axe down, over Attila's shoulder and down past his spine, to drive the back-spike into his kidney.

Attila gasped and dropped him, Tanner losing his grip on the handle, so the axe stayed buried in place as he fell. From the floor, he whipped the second axe across and chopped deep into the man's ankle. As Attila sagged to his knees, Tanner struggled up again and whacked the flat of the blade down onto the top of Attila's head.

One more, the same thing Attila had done to him the other night. Tanner flipped his grip to hold the axe under its head and swatted him across the jaw with the handle, to send him sprawling backward, then toppling onto his side with the axe in the way.

He didn't seem prone to getting up soon.

Tanner wavered as the room swirled and settled around him, and thought he was probably beyond ever feeling steady on his feet again. *Ever* didn't seem all that long now, anyway. He was leaking blood from so many places he might as well have been sweating it. He could no longer draw a full, deep breath, and felt so weak now he couldn't remember what it was like to feel strong.

Five minutes was an eternity ago.

Daphne? Still here, still standing, wearing a sweater that didn't fit her right. She peered at him as if she'd never seen him before, and the clarity had cracked her heart in two. His own lurched when he didn't spot Desmond, then Daphne read his fear and pointed to the floor by the sofa, where he lay writhing and clutching his wattled throat. He'd pissed his pants, too.

Good. Whatever she'd done, good.

"There's a woman with them, too," he said.

"Not anymore."

Daphne hurried to steady him before he could fall and steered him to a chair. She hugged him as though she wanted nothing more than to squeeze him tight but knew it would be a bad idea. He smiled and his lower lip split for his trouble, but he couldn't help it. Her hands were tender and her eyes were wet, and nothing in this world right now felt stronger than her heart. She was every long-ago thing he remembered her to be, and had always clung to, and had nearly forgotten, because it had been so long since he'd seen it. But it was there. He'd never lost faith that it was there.

"You stupid meathead." Her lips were soft against his brow and came away red. "I don't think there's much time left."

For him? That was stating the obvious. Daphne seemed to be thinking bigger, though. They'd all thought bigger here.

"For what?"

"For everything." She showed him somebody's phone.

Once he figured out what he was seeing, he got the idea. The unthinkable idea. *They will come and end this useless fucking world, and really make something of the ashes.*

Except . . . they hadn't. *They* had failed.

He heard a groan and a scrape against the floor, then the clack of wood on wood. Attila had propped himself up on one elbow and was reaching around his back, trying to grab the axe handle.

“You better leave that where it is,” Tanner said. “It’s in your kidney. I know how painful that must be, but right now it’s a plug. Pull it out and there’s nothing either of us can do to stop the bleeding.”

By the sound, it hurt Attila to laugh. “Why should you care, big brother?”

“Last Rites. I don’t want you to die without having communion.”

Tanner hobbled over using the other axe as a crude and too-short cane. But it got him there. It felt important to do this without Daphne’s help, and he preferred that she hang back anyway. If she thought she was hiding that it pained her to see Attila in this state, too, she wasn’t. Her face had never been the mask she’d thought it was.

He fished in his shirt pocket for the three meaty chunks, shapeless and gnawed, he’d been able to dredge from his bucket. For a moment they looked like blue flannel, then like his hand, mottling flesh streaked with blood.

“I want you to know how you were duped. How you were used. How this whole ugly life of yours was a lie.” His voice was going raspier by the minute. He held out his hand, palm up, level with Attila’s eyes. “You really should know all that. These should let you see it from the source.”

Attila squinted at his offering, playing dumb, playing for time. “And what are those supposed to be?”

“You know what they’re from, you just can’t figure out how I got them. All you have to do is eat them.”

Attila didn’t appear persuaded. “And if I don’t?”

Tanner hefted the axe. “Then I take your fingers off and feed these to you myself.”

Attila’s face was all clenched teeth and streaming sweat. “I may be the one with an axe in his back, but you still look like you might have trouble doing that.”

Daphne was at his side anyway. “He might have help.”

Before he could toss them down, Daphne plucked one from his hand and

stashed it in the pocket of her sweater. Tanner looked at her with imploring eyes and an urgent shake of his head. *No. Please don't, no. You don't know where those have been and that's the least of it.*

Never could tell her anything. She had to know. She always had to know.

Attila decided he would rather die with his fingers on. He chewed and swallowed and tried very hard to keep his face impassive. Until he couldn't.

Tanner went to the floor beside him. It was going to be agony getting up again.

"The part I can't stand?" he said. "This thing you've always been after, you actually worked against it all along, because you're that stupid . . . and you're still getting half of what you wanted anyway. There just won't be anything rising from the ashes. There won't even be ashes."

No sand, no sea. No earth, no sky. Only Ginnungagap.

Attila heard him but couldn't focus on him, his vision split between two realms, each of them cruel in its own way.

"I know you. If you can't have the rise, you'll settle for watching it fall. And it's happening. But I'll be goddamned if I let you *see* it."

Tanner reversed the axe in his peeling hands. As ruinous as its back-spike was for a kidney, it was devastating on a pair of eyes.

I'd never really thought about it before, and was grieving enough for what I was seeing happen in front of me, so this made it ten times worse.

For as much as he'd always looked out for me, for as much heart as he'd put into trying to atone for a lapse in attention any twelve-year-old boy might have had that day, for as hard as he'd been trying to earn the forgiveness I kept telling him he didn't need, because I'd never blamed him to begin with . . . Tanner had never asked me for a single thing. Not once.

So all there ever was, and all there ever would be, was this:

"Get me home," he said. "I need you to get me home."

He was weak and bleeding, coming apart a little at a time, unraveling from the outside in. I had no idea how he was going to travel. Twenty miles, more or less, but I figured if I could get him to the car, I could get him the rest of the way.

I plundered the closet off the bathroom. One thing Attila hated anybody to know about him was that he had the kind of bad knees that can bother a guy his size. So he always kept plenty of ACE bandages. I wound them around my brother where he needed them the most, to keep him going a little longer. He was doing the rest of it from the inside, by sheer force of his inhumanly stubborn will.

"There, you finally get to be a proper mummy." Keep talking, I had to keep him talking. "Remember that Halloween when a mummy was all you wanted to be?"

I'd always adored his crooked grin, but now it was too crooked. "And Mom cut that sheet into strips to wrap around me. They didn't last an hour."

How could I be laughing so hard? "The only mummy in history with long johns underneath."

"Used to love Halloween." His voice wasn't much more than breath with a sharpened edge. "Remember the Ramsegers down the street? They'd put all those decorations out in their front yard? Tons of candy?"

It took a few moments, but I did. The Ramsegers . . . they loved kids. Then it came out that across the street from them was the real house of horrors, and there couldn't be any going back to pretend.

"She still thinks about you. I promised her I'd tell you that. She put out flowers for you the other day."

Oh god. He'd seemed lucid . . . but maybe his mind was going too.

Then I had him ready to go. A step at a time, that was how we did it. With a stick in his hand for a cane and my arm around his shoulders. One step at a time. My body to lean on, so he didn't fall when his ankles failed him. One rickety step at a time.

Outside in the street, dusk had closed in with a purpling sky and the air was filled with the wailing of distant sirens. It was the sound of life going wrong all

over, of the end of safe havens, a funeral dirge an entire city could hear.

I eased him into the car and proved to him, one more time, why he'd always been right to fear riding with me. We could laugh about that, too, even if I no longer recognized the sound of his laughter. Traffic wasn't bad yet through the city and in the outbound northwest lanes—it was a Sunday evening, after all—but I was afraid it might be worse soon, and was relieved to beat it, and hoped Bianca did, too.

Something's happening, she'd texted before Tanner and I had left Attila's.

I know, I texted back while losing my mind at a stoplight. *Busy right now.*

I can't wait much longer.

Then you better go. Will I see you again?

If you're my friend and you love me, you know where I have to be. We'll wait for you there awhile.

The thing we had going for us was that it was still early. Even if people saw what was happening streaming live from Chamonix, from Uluru, from Pont-Rouge, from wherever else it might have been happening, they wouldn't believe it. Not until it came to swallow them, too. They'd call it a hoax, fake news, somebody's viral marketing campaign. They'd give it a glance. *Looks Photoshopped*, they would say, then keep on surfing.

So I owned the road. Twenty reckless miles of urgency. Twenty blurry miles of tears. Twenty tender miles of holding the hand of the brother who'd never stopped trying to reach through time and pull me back from getting in the wrong van.

A few miles from Lafayette, it stopped feeling like a hand.

Still, from expressways to side streets to neighborhoods, I got him home.

"I have this friend," I told him as we rolled up before his house. "The first day we met for real, she called me a Valkyrie. You remember what they do, don't you?"

Of course he did. He ate that stuff up when we were kids, little Gustafsons wanting to know where we came from. Like so many boys with no appreciation for what they're really saying, Tanner was the kid who told his friends he wanted to die in battle. He would tell them of Valkyries, blonde and strapping, tasked

with carrying chosen warriors, the fallen brave, to their reward in their hall on high.

"You qualify," I whispered in his ear, and kissed him on his sagging cheek.

When we got him out of the car, I didn't know how he could still be alive. He was blind. He had no eyes anymore; I'd had to wipe them from his cheeks. The elastic bandages were his skin now. As I moved him, bones broke with no more resistance than breadsticks. His breath was down to sips of air so shallow they wouldn't fill a shot glass. He knew, though.

Ten feet from the car I had to lay him in the yard, because I didn't think he could handle me dragging him one more step. But he knew. It was almost time to let go. Home was the people, not the place. I beat on the door until it opened.

I wondered what it would've been like to have found someone who loved me so much they could endure the utmost heights of joy and the most profound depths of sorrow in the very same moment, at our reunion. Seeing Beryl, my sister-in-law, I could be glad I'd never had that effect on someone.

But as the sky roared with the sound of a terrible rumbling from the north, she knew as well as I did that something far greater than our little drama was wrong with the world.

They hadn't been married for a year before Beryl came to hate me. I always knew that, and couldn't say it wasn't earned. Nothing was going to change now. It was the only reason I didn't stay. This was their time. I had intruded on enough.

And their little boy, my nephew, Reese? He was still hanging back, rooted in the doorway to the porch. I would say he was watching, except nobody could ever be sure of what he saw, with his interminable stare into a distance that neither his parents nor anyone else could cross.

He appeared to be smiling now, though.

I'd never once seen that poor kid smile.

In a place without sight or sound, he knew touch.

In a place of cold, he knew warmth.

In a place of turbulence, he knew tranquility.

In a place barren and arid, he knew the damp of tears.

Things fell apart, the center did not hold.

Until he knew, in all its unmanifest forms, nothing.

I had to abandon my car on the winding, two-lane road, more than a mile from where I wanted to be, because so many before me had done the same. As I wove a moonlit path through this frozen river of vehicles, the more of them I passed, the more the implications began to weigh: Where had these people come from, and from how far away, and how had they all known?

Like the guy on the Greyhound, I guess, striking out because it was the only thing that felt right anymore, and he could keep figuring it out along the way.

Like the people I'd seen streaming west through Denver, course correcting until they realized the course was run.

Like Bianca. Finally learning to trust the strangeness in her heart.

As headlights from more arrivals swept in from behind, I caught up to the stragglers, the slow ones who must have been waiting for this for decades, never at peace with what made them so different, maybe never knowing at all. Nobody seemed to be taking any joy in being here, but no sorrow, either. Relief—that was the feeling in the frosty mountain air. A rising tide of relief.

I knew them on sight, would've known them with my eyes closed. I would've known them with no eyes at all. I felt them in my heart and in my cheek. So many together, so many all at once, they hit me like a pressure wave. I might have overloaded if I hated them the way I was supposed to, running in circles like a dog who doesn't know which squirrel to chase first.

My needs were simple, though, getting simpler all the time. And they were met.

“There she is. There’s Aunt Daphne.”

See? That was all I wanted to hear.

They were waiting by the Chapel on the Rock. When I hugged Bianca, then Magpie, it felt as though it had been so much longer than an afternoon and an evening since I’d seen them. Whole stages of life had come and gone since then.

“You’re still wearing my sweater.” She sounded genuinely surprised, God love her.

“I didn’t want to pack my stuff anyway. Nobody likes moving.”

Even now, she looked worried for everybody’s sake but her own. “There’s blood on it. A lot.”

“It’s not mine,” I said, just before some wall inside crumbled long enough to unleash a minute of blubbering.

She pressed close to hug me again, slower now, a grandiose embrace full of faith that it could take whatever had happened and make it better again.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You shouldn’t let it bother you now. It won’t matter soon. None of it will.”

When I looked down at Magpie, her little face was serious, anxious and unsettled by the stains on her mother’s cardigan. Way to go, Daphne; I should’ve turned it inside-out before now. When I did—see, all gone now—it helped, and she stopped looking so stressed. Out of sight, out of mind. But she still knew something big was up.

“Piggyback ride?” Like I didn’t know the answer already. I swept her up onto my shoulders and the three of us set off through the trees. I’d been here enough times I felt I should know the way even at night, with the pines between our path and the moon. To either side of us we heard the rustling movement of others, who couldn’t all have been here before, yet their feet sounded just as sure.

By now I felt the pull too, even if it was just a tickle and a tug on my cheek.

From movies I knew that the closer you came to the edge of a black hole, the more time would seem to slow. That had to be a little something like now. Each step forward was the next digit in a countdown, that brought an enveloping sensation of leaving the world behind and straying into a borderland between

everything that still was and the dissolving memory of everything that was no more. The soil knew it, and the trees . . . even the air. We could still breathe it, but it began to feel sterile, and thin in a way that had nothing to do with altitude. We had to push our voices harder to be heard, as if the air no longer wanted to carry the sound.

When we reached the rock formation, conglomerate stone that remembered being pillars and a wall, it loomed so much greater now, because there was so much less around it. It stood as a rugged spire on the precipice of forever.

Before tonight, the alpine forest had marched in a green belt all the way to the distant slopes, but now this was where the trees ended, where the ground itself ended. I thought seeing it on the phone, from Chamonix, might have prepared me a little bit for the sight of the real thing. Just me being naïve. Nothing can prepare you to approach the edge of an expanding hole in the world. It fell away before us and yawned toward the peaks in a canyon-sized rift that cracked the valley in two. I could see no bottom to it, only moonlit layers of earth and rock that plunged into the vapor of a cold, misty gloom, churning in silent turbulence and pulsing with flickers like weak lightning. Beyond this, an endless well of living darkness.

Around us, men and women stripped off their clothes and cast them aside. Some of the more able-bodied ones scaled the rock formation. I was impressed at how easily they could do it . . . until I saw that the stone was softening around them, scooped into hand- and footholds that helped them ascend. They reached the top with rapture and relief, then maneuvered to the far end and went over the edge into nothingness. Some launched up and out into soaring dives. Others stood for a moment, composed and still, then toppled forward like statues.

Magpie's weight shifted on my shoulders as she turned her head away.

"It's okay, everybody's just going swimming," I blurted.

I slung her down and left my new family behind so I could continue to the very edge, like approaching the rim of a cliff. The drop-off was steep at first, the angle turning shallower on the way down, curving away like the side of a vast bowl. While another atavist, naked as the day she was born, took the plunge, I saw that they were aiming for a long ridge of stone, like the roots of the topside

formation, that had been uncovered as if by erosion.

Another fell, and another. I watched them hit down below. As my vision grew keener in the gloom, I could see they weren't so much being broken by the fall as being absorbed on impact, like mud into mud. Their bodies began to lose all differentiation, arms and legs, torsos and heads, flowing one into another, homogenizing into a kind of primordial ooze that began a few yards out from the edge and streamed down the slope toward that well of waiting darkness.

Bianca . . . she'd known what she was all along, even if she hadn't known how to get back to it.

If I could, I would crawl inside it and melt with it and stay forever.

When I returned to them, Bianca had shed her clothes, as well, and in the moonlight looked . . . magnificent. For somebody who had never felt at home in the form she was in, she seemed remarkably at ease in her skin.

Magpie beamed. "Mama's going swimming, too."

This was really happening. This was always going to happen and now it was here.

"Are *you* going swimming?"

That laugh where you cry, then your throat seizes up and you can't do either? I gave them a master class in it right then.

"No, they wouldn't want me in their pool," I told her when I could. "I'd rather hang out with you, anyway."

While people moved past us as if we were a boulder in a stream, paying us no mind, Bianca got down on her knees and hugged her daughter, and kissed her all over, so hard I thought they would melt together on their own. She stood again, then it was my turn, her arms around me one last time, and her lips on my cheek, then my mouth.

"I don't think I would be here if it wasn't for you." Already she sounded so far away. "I know it's hard for you to see that as something good. But to me, it's everything. It's everything at once."

With a gentle nudge, she pushed Magpie into my thigh, and it didn't hit me until this moment, what had really been going on here. She was mine now. For the rest of our lives, Magpie was mine.

Then we were looking at Bianca's back as she joined the procession.

After seven months, was she the best friend I ever had? I'd done things for her I hadn't for anyone else. Could she have been more than a friend? Maybe. But to find out something like that, it has to unfold in its own time, and we hadn't had enough.

Bianca wasn't built for climbing, so the last I saw of her, someone else had taken her by the hand, and it looked as if the melding began even before they stepped over the edge. I guess it counted as personal growth that I could be glad for her, that she didn't have to go it alone.

I stared at the empty spot where she'd been long after she was gone, my hands splayed across the back on Magpie's bony shoulders as I kept her face pressed against my hip. We stayed that way until, from far in the west, there came sound like the gathering roar of an avalanche. As I watched, an entire chain of snow-capped peaks fell and disappeared from view. It jarred me into moving again, as I realized how much closer the edge of the rift was now, like an incoming tide that was taking the shore with it.

"Let's go find ourselves a little hill to sit on while we wait," I said.

Magpie was game. But not too far, she warned me. We had to make sure Mama could still find us after she was done swimming. I promised her that it would all work out later. We'd find each other again.

As I held her hand, we dropped back into the trees and circled around so we were away from the path of this escalating migration of souls. When we came upon a little rise in the land, I steered us up it until we were at its crest, then we settled onto a spot where the ground was cushioned with pine needles that had half decayed into the soil. Through the trees, the rift continued to widen and lengthen, and if you could appreciate it for what it was, our view was spectacular.

"Where's the water?" Magpie said. "I still don't see any water."

"It's down there."

She had no trouble accepting this. "Mama always talks about water at home. She wants a pond. Daddy wants a pool but Mama wants a pond. It makes them fight."

I looped my arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I’m sorry. That’s no fun to listen to.”

We sat awhile and listened to the cracks and rumbles that echoed in from the distance, until I decided it was time, now or never. Because soon, all our thoughts would be forgotten, all our deeds would be undone.

I held us nose to nose so Magpie didn’t miss a word. “I need you to be extra special super good now, okay? I have to take some medicine. Nothing’s wrong, I just need to take it. So I don’t want you to worry. You know how sometimes when you take medicine it makes you sleepy?”

She nodded.

“It might make me sleepy, too. Or I might say something silly, or sound like I’m having a bad dream. But it shouldn’t last long if I do. I’ll still be right here with you. Okay?”

Of course she was okay. Because she trusted me. I could have led her to a van and driven her to the nearest toolshed and she would’ve trusted me the whole way.

Then I pulled that shapeless lump of tissue from my pocket, popped it in my mouth, and had it down before I could change my mind. I didn’t know what it was, exactly, where the three of them had come from or how Tanner had come to have them. He seemed to know and Attila seemed to have suspected, but all I cared about was what it was supposed to show me. I’d put worse things in my mouth for less payoff.

It was tough and fibrous, like meat that had been freeze-dried, then halfway reconstituted, with a sourness that cramped the corners of my jaw. It made me shudder with a chill that came from far beyond the mountains. I knew what it was now, the transient flesh of an eternal mind, assembled for convenience and trapped in the moment, with a tiny spark of godhood left behind.

I lay back on the ground beside Magpie, and her hand was the last thing of here and now that I felt before I was swept away, my mind’s eye tumbling through a vortex of chronologies and out the other side. I’d been in this state before, my first trip up here, holding fast to Bianca’s stone formation before she pulled me back, and must have learned just enough then to keep myself from

getting completely unmoored between the quasars and the quarks.

For years I'd been pursued by the whispers of false gods, telling me who was mine to kill and why. Now I could hear their howling fury, that I'd refused to follow where they'd tried so urgently to lead. Though they were beyond faces, I could still see through their eyes, perceiving the cosmos as they did—as a never-ending series of breaths, inhalations and exhalations, expansions and contractions.

I was present for their birth, coalescing from the dust in the space between the newborn stars. Now I was privileged to be present at their death, all of us poised on the threshold of yet another end.

I could almost feel sorry for them, because sometimes it's better not to know. How horrible must it be, to be so powerful as to span eternity, yet still find yourself a slave shackled to the process that made you, helpless to stop it when the time came to once more break it all apart and start again.

Across this world, across a hundred more, I saw atavists on the march, in ten thousand varied bodies, as worlds crumbled in their wake.

The atavists were the key. Be they animal, vegetable, or mineral, the atavists were the trigger. They always had been. They always would be. From one blossoming of the universe to the next, to the tenth after that, and the trillionth.

What an affront they must have been to the kind of arrogance that would presume to call itself a god. And how I loved them for it, because I could.

Imagine—infinitely older than the oldest gods, because they transcended time absolutely. There had always been a Bianca. There had always been a Brodie. There had always been the bear and the birds and our memory stone . . . atavists each and every one. They were the oldest beings of all, and the antithesis of gods—humble, of dirt and water and air and wood and rock. They came in new forms that remembered old forms, with no greater yearning than to return to the emptiness that had spawned them, because it was only in potential that they achieved perfection.

No wonder the gods wanted them dead, destroyed, diluted, and dispersed.

Imagine—eternity is yours, yet being helpless to watch as your undoing wanders the earth of its own mortal will. Or as it crosses the galaxy in streaks of

green fire, to hurtle one into another in collisions of ecstatic union. And always, as the slow pull of a gravity that only atavists could feel draws them toward each another, in ever greater numbers, until . . .

Critical mass.

Boom. Time to try again.

The void was the only deity that mattered. The void sent forth. The void took back. The void sent forth again.

Like I said, there are some things that even scare the shit out of the gods.

I couldn't quite hate them for it, because no matter how monstrously cruel and selfish they were, they wanted what we all want—a little more time. I *wouldn't* hate them, because now I saw that it would've been one more step to giving in.

As I began to feel the ground beneath me again, grass and soil and pine needles, and a tiny hand shaking my arm, and heard the voice that went with the hand, here was the thing that made me sickest to my soul: this realization that, in order to thwart the Great Cycle, these beings who would be gods relied on the likes of Attila to get it done.

They bet on hate and hate alone, the only virtue they found useful. They hadn't tried love. They scorned the notions of cooperation and altruism. They'd never tried inspiring anyone to come together, face the challenge, and ask, okay, how can we work this out for the good of all.

None of that. Instead, they must have looked into human hearts a long time ago and decided that an eagerness to slaughter was the one constant they could depend on over time. Kill for us, and be rewarded. Believe our lies, and be indulged.

And be sure to pass it on.

"Something's wrong with your cheek." The first words I heard that I could make sense of. "Aunt Daphne? What's wrong with your cheek?"

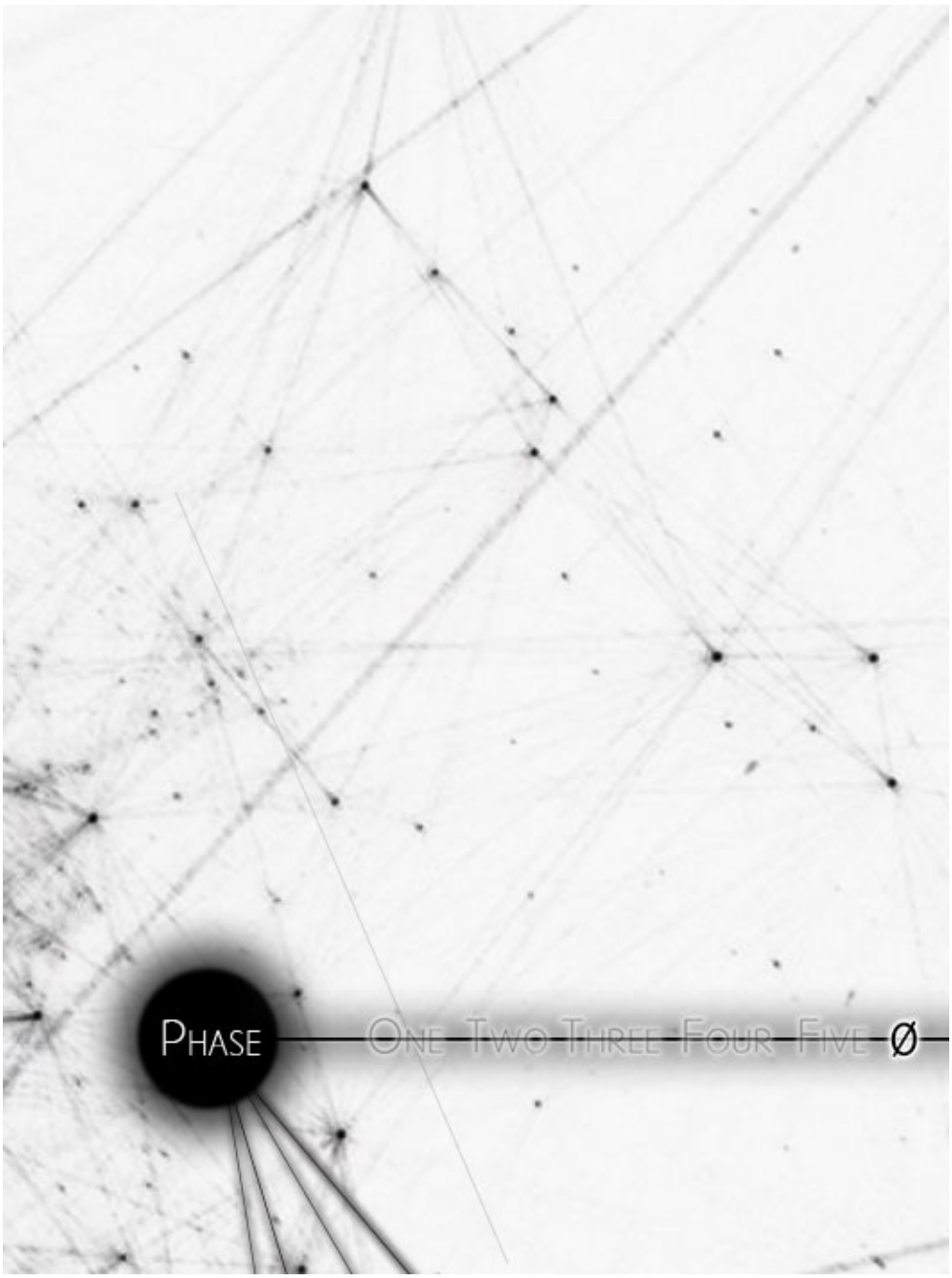
Nothing felt different, but I knew the spot Magpie had to mean. The one that had always been subject to a prior claim.

When I reached my fingers up to check, they touched a growing hole. Only then did I notice the flakes of skin glittering in the moonlight as they left me and

streamed toward the rift in our world. The all-swallowing chasm was so much closer now than it was before, a few feet ahead of us, close enough for me to see the walls of earth and bedrock and the trunks of trees crumbling away like finer and finer grains of sand, until they were sucked down toward the flickering darkness in spiraling cascades of dust.

I turned Magpie away from the sight of it, as mountains fell and gods howled, and pressed her face to my breast, to hold her tight for as long as I could.

And still, she trusted me.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When the universe has crushed him, man will still be nobler than that which kills him, because he knows he is dying, and of its victory, the universe knows nothing.
—Blaise Pascal

So that was my life. It seemed to pass in a flash.

In the end, as I think of the choices I've made, I find that a petty side of me wants to believe one option could only ever be as meaningless as the next.

I could've kidnapped Magpie that day, and driven us off into the sunset, and it wouldn't have mattered, because we still would've ended up in the same place. I could have killed Bianca like I was supposed to, to see what would happen, and it wouldn't have mattered. We could've let Gregg's body rot in the tub and that wouldn't have mattered either. I could have picked up the phone and turned my friend in, rather than try to help her find a more authentic life without being abused for it, and it just wouldn't have mattered. Years ago, I could've come to my brother in his sleep, like Morgan le Fay to Arthur, and tricked him into fathering a child because I never knew a better man, and even that wouldn't have mattered.

None of it would have mattered either way.

Except . . . it does. To me, it does. Every choice, good and bad.

Because someday, in a million years, or a billion, or so far from now there isn't even a number for it . . . in the next version of the universe, or the one after that, or the thousand-and-first . . . these particles that used to be me will, against

astronomical odds, end up together again.

Whatever they have combined to make then, I don't want them to be weighed down by some ancient memory from a time when this gravity at the heart of me, that bound them together, knew the right thing to do under the circumstances, and couldn't be bothered to try.

It's all connected, remember. Everything's connected.

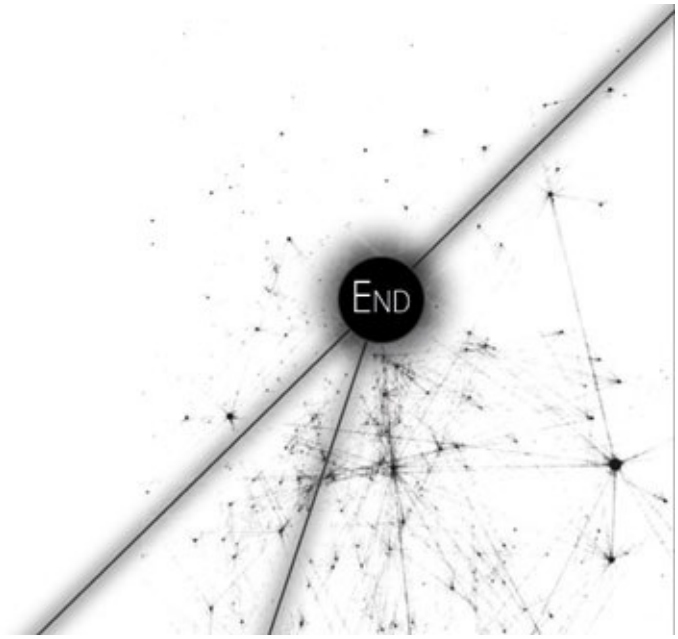
So it matters. It has to. It just has to.

I will find myself again. I'll give it one more try, as something better.

And next time, I don't want to break, or be broken.

I don't want to stay down mired in the mud.

Next time, I want to fly.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Called “a writer of spectacularly unflinching gifts” by no less than Peter Straub, Brian Hodge is one of those people who always has to be making something. So far, he’s made thirteen novels, around 130 shorter works, five full-length collections, and, for Whom the Gods Would Destroy, a book soundtrack of cinematic ambient and space music. One recent novella of cosmic horror has been optioned for development as a TV series.

He lives in Colorado, where he also likes to make music and photographs; loves everything about organic gardening except the thieving squirrels; and trains in Krav Maga and kickboxing, which are of no use at all against the squirrels.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It wasn’t supposed to be this way.

The Immaculate Void first got rolling as an intended anchor piece for my next story collection, which would also give the book as a whole its title. But then the thing kept blooming and unfurling. By the time it was over, I’d accidentally written a novel. It’s happened before.

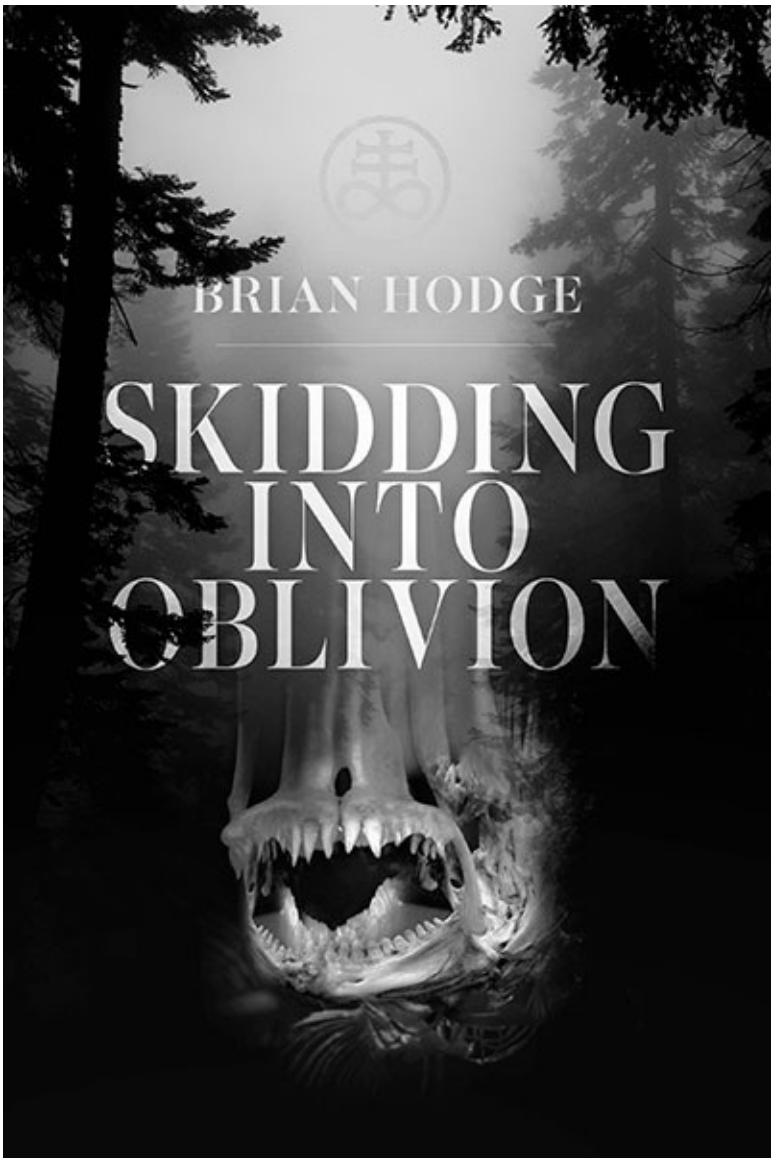
Big thanks, then, to publishers Brett Savory and Sandra Kasturi for being the first of us to admit what was already bothering me: that it was no longer the book I’d envisioned. A novel arc-welded onto the back of a collection is its own kind of lopsided. Their Solomonic solution came as a relief: cut one book into two. This way, The Immaculate Void, now a novel, and the rejiggered collection, now called Skidding Into Oblivion, and still to come, could each stand as its own entity. I think of them as companion books, and they’re both better for it.

It wasn’t supposed to start the way it did, either . . . at the dining table, because I couldn’t fit at my desk. For several months after knee surgery, my leg was in a brace, usually elevated, and simply getting across a room was a major production. So I would be remiss if I didn’t dispatch another truckload of thanks to the BoulderCentre for Orthopedics, for fully repairing what could’ve been a permanently hobbling injury.

I’m still amazed at how thoroughly I’ve healed and rehabbed. Still grateful, on a daily basis, for the gift of unhindered movement. So thanks to whatever force it

is that holds my atoms together, making adjustments as needed.

And, as ever, to Doli, who holds me together in so many other ways.



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